







# HUNGRY BENGAL

BY

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PUBLISHED BY :

INDIAN PRINTING WORKS  
KACHERI ROAD :: :: LAHORE

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*Printed and Published by Mr. Narain Das Kumar at the Indian Printing Wor*

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# INTRODUCTION

## A word on behalf of the Hungry Millions

**H**UNGRY Bengal is merely a shadow of hungry India. If Bengal is dying to-day, India shall have to die to-morrow. India has three problems—the food situation, the political deadlock, and the War. We must fight the War to win the victory. But how can India fight when there is a food crisis distressing many of her brave children? How can she win the victory if she is disunited amongst the Hindus, the Muslims, the Sikhs, and the Christians? How can she put her body and soul into the struggle against the common enemy when she has no future of salvation from the bondage of political slavery and economic exploitation? The task before the British Government as well as before the people of India is, therefore, first to relieve the economic distress and then to resolve the political deadlock, and last of all, to bend all their energy to win the War.

The War must be won and India also must be set free, because without the independence of India, the



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peace of the world cannot be achieved. Japan is a capitalist power, and as such, she is a menace to America and Britain and to all the democratic countries of the world. She has already proceeded too far in her aggression in the Pacific as Germany has done in Europe. China and India can easily tackle Japan as Russia is tackling Germany. But there must be the genuine goodwill and also sufficient material support from all the democratic countries of the world to crush for ever the Fascist or Totalitarian monsters of the East and the West. If Britain and America want to be the saviours of the world, they must immediately set India free. The four hundred million souls of this country, however famished, however uncivilised, and however ill-trained they may be, can wipe out Japan from the face of the earth if they are let loose from the shackles of bondage and slavery.

Mr. N.C. Chatterjee in the course of his presidential address at the All-India Hindu Students' Conference at Amritsar said on the 28th December 1943 :—

“ Freedom from famine can be secured by freedom from alien bondage. India wants her freedom. Unfortunately, Mr. Churchill has denied it. We wanted to fight as a free nation side by side with the United Nations. The Hindu Mahasabha was practical. It gave a lead to the country to militarise and to equip our people in order to defend our country. Mr. Churchill

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has declared that he has not become the first Minister to work for the liquidation of the British Empire. The Atlantic Charter has been drowned in the Bay of Bengal. Truly India has confronted Britain with a first class moral problem in this War. It is foolish to say that our people are pro-Japanese. However much the differences in India may be exaggerated or exploited, whatever may be the propaganda of the nominated emissaries of the British Government in the various countries, India is to-day determined to get both justice and freedom this time. Pakistan would mean the crippling of both the Hindus and the Muslims in Bengal and in the Punjab. The grim realities of famine have demonstrated beyond the shadow of doubt that in order to feed our starving people food-stuff must come from Hindusthan. Pakistan would have completely converted Bengal into a Kabaristhan. In spite of all financial or other considerations we must refuse to exchange our undivided and indivisible India for any independent fragmented units. There are millions and millions in Bengal and in the Punjab and in Maharashtra and other parts of India who, if there need be, will die for it.

“Famine-stricken Bengal has special lessons to impart to the student world of Hindusthan. Due to starvation, malnutrition, and disease millions of our people have perished. We are grateful to the Punjab and other provinces for the spontaneous assistance

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rendered to famished Bengal. Particularly the splendid work done by the Arya Samaj deserves mention. From the denial policy enforced by the then Governor of Bengal to the reckless purchasing scheme sponsored by the League Ministry, it has been a tragic chapter of bungling, inefficiency, and corruption. Some ministry thrived on such calamity, and the exploited masses were grounded down by the party caucus which swore allegiance to the League. Dr. Moonje and Lala Kushalchand had been good enough to tour some of the affected areas in Bengal. The horrible sights of death and desolation would melt the stoutest hearts.

“ Bengal is now in the grip of malaria and cholera, and there is paucity of quinine and other drugs which can save human lives. In some villages in East Bengal more than half the population has been swept away by famine and its aftermath. In some places in Midnapore skulls are lying on the roadside, the jackals having devoured the rest of the famished victims of the famine. Upto the end of October in the district of Dinajpur 5,451 persons were attacked with cholera and 3,462 persons perished. We have not obtained figures from October. In one Union in the district of Birbhum 166 were attacked with cholera and 69 died. In one subdivision in the district of Bankura about 95% of the people are down with malaria. In Munshigunj subdivision in the district of Dacca thousands have perished. In Burdwan district about 50% of malaria cases proved fatal. In Bhola subdivision in the district of Barisal about 40,000 people have perished. In the district of

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Birbhum 16,016 persons died from January to August, and the death roll from famine, malaria, and starvation anaemia amounted to 5,000 per month from September. In the Brahmanbaria subdivision in the district of Tipperah over 1,000 die per week. In the Salar Union in Murshidabad district about 2,700 people died of starvation, malaria, and other diseases. The price of rice in the countryside had been steadily coming down as the new Aman crop came to the market, but there has been a recent tendency towards a sharp rise as some powerful agents appeared in the market for buying rice. If there is tampering with the new Aman rice, then famine would return, and Bengal would be finished.

“If our leader Dr. Shyamaprasad Mukerjee had not raised his voice for the unfortunate people of Bengal possibly a million more would have perished, and the Central Government would have continued its attitude of *laissez faire*. This famine has clearly demonstrated that a strong Central Government is essential to cope with such a crisis and to co-ordinate the activities of the provinces. It will be a blunder to weaken the Centre in the future constitution of India.

“From the dawn of civilisation the golden fields of Bengal have evoked the admiration of the greedy conqueror and of the foreign travellers. Bengal was looked upon as the granary of the East. That is why, foreigners hankered after Bengal, and when they conquered Bengal, India was conquered. Due to the manoeuvring

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on the part of a Governor, who played the role of the Chief Whip of the Muslim League, Fazlul Huq Ministry was squeezed out of office, and the League Ministry was installed in power as the result of an Anglo-League conspiracy. Those of you who have read the historic letters of Dr. Shyamaprasad Mukerjee would remember how the foreign bureaucracy tried to thwart the working of self-government in Bengal. They wanted a more amenable and less self-assertive Ministry against all canons of Parliamentary Government, and the League Ministry was set up in office. When men and women were dying in thousands in different parts of Bengal, when children were sucking the breasts of their dead mothers on the pavements of the city of Calcutta, when thousands of the destitute refugees were being tortured by the pangs of hunger to slow and sure death, the Viceroy of India stuck to his Palace in New Delhi and did not care to move down to the scenes of horror, death, and desolation in our unfortunate province. The Muslim League Ministry was urged by Mr. Jinnah to establish Pakistan in our part of India. But at least a million Hindus and a million Muslims perished due to the bungling and inefficiency on the part of his accredited agents. The Imperialists sat tight and were spreading false propaganda in order to mislead people. The League Ministry appointed their own satellites as Government agents who sucked in the life-blood of the nation, namely, the rice of Bengal, and that led to the price racket and also the mounting death-roll. This

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famine was an opportunity to ingenious Ministers to consolidate their political position and party hegemony, thanks to the backing they got from higher quarters. If the British race had been made of the same stuff of which Burke, Fox, and Sheridan had sprung, they would have demanded an impeachment of the great pro-consuls who ruled over the destinies of masses and whose tragic policy or apathy led to the slaughter of human lives on a large scale.

“The unfortunate policy of the Bengal Ministry had greatly encouraged the Black Market and also the profiteers and hoarders. When Dr. Hriday Nath Kunzru visited Dacca, he found that the price of rice had gone up to Rs. 125 per maund. In parts of Munshigunj it was more than Rs. 80 per maund, and people were dying like flies in the different districts of Bengal. In Midnapore people were suffering from the triple ravages of cyclone, political repression, and famine. We know from our own experience that during this period thousands of maunds of rice were available outside Bengal in neighbouring provinces at Rs. 10 or Rs. 12 per maund. What can be the explanation of our men, women, and children being decimated by hunger, when plenty of rice was available in contiguous area and British rule had not ceased to exist? They blame the Nazi robbers who have deprived Bengal of Burma rice. But what about people in authority who defaulted in their primary duty and did not either procure or distribute the rice or food grains which could have saved thousands of human lives? Now that the Viceroy has ordered the wagons,

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more and more food grains reach the rural areas. But they came too late for the thousands of victims who perished. Now the task of re-habilitation of the country is a colossal one. Social and economic life has been completely disrupted. If you want to serve your country, this is a great opportunity for constructive social and economic service."

If what Mr. N. C. Chatterjee has said in the course of his presidential address is even partly true, it is high time for the Government and the people of India to take a warning in order to save, not only Bengal against a relapse of the famine, but also the whole country of 400 million souls against any lurking calamity of the same magnitude that may be visiting our unhappy motherland during the course of the War or after its successful termination. India's economic condition depends not only upon the judicious co-ordination of the Provincial resources but also upon the healthy co-operation of the various political bodies in the country. It is rather unfortunate that at this psychological moment, most of the political leaders of our country are behind the bars or are cut off from the scenes of suffering and destitution. They could have probably devised some ways and means in consultation with the Government to avert any future calamity, if they were set free. The task before the new Viceroy is therefore to consider seriously how far it would be beneficial to the country for its economic relief as well as for its defence against the enemy during progress of the War to release Mahatma Gandhi and his lieutenants in order to console the suffering people and also to strengthen the hands of the Government for a judicious tackling of the political and economic crisis.

T. K. DUTT.

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## CHAPTER I

### The Conditions of Life in Bengal

**T**HERE is not a district in Bengal which I have not seen or where I have not lived atleast for some days. I have visited practically all the towns of Bengal and also a few villages. The picture is the same, the tale is also the very same which most of the provinces of India have to show or tell. In India towns are far worse than villages in England—worse, not because they are less beautiful or less bountiful in natural resources, but because they are most wretchedly backward and poor in industrial, commercial, and every kind of material equipments of life which count as the real strength of a country or as the solid power of a nation.

The poets and the artists may beautify Bengal with the colours of their imagination and paint her in the eyes of the world as a paradise of green fields, silver streams, golden soil, glowing forests, smiling gardens, and so many other adornments of Nature. But then, with all her natural loveliness, she looms large as the sorriest picture when we turn to the human world, the



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human habitations, the human towns and villages in which millions of human souls have lived and died, and are still living and dying more wretchedly than even the brutes and the animals in the wilderness.

If you visit the *Sundarbans* which is the biggest and deepest forest in Bengal and probably the most well-known forest in all India for its tigers and other ferocious animals and also for its wonderful snakes and birds, you may be tempted to say that Bengal is indeed a paradise of birds and beasts and trees and flowers, but not surely of human beings whom Shakespeare, the greatest poet of the world, has declared as the paragons of animals and as the crown of God's creations.

When you talk of towns in Bengal, you must fancy before your eyes a mere huddle of a few brick-built houses, corrugated iron sheds with brick or mud walls, and also of thatched cottages which put up their heads of revolt against all laws of modernisation of life either in pure disdain or in blind superstition or in economic distress. There may be one or two roads or streets slightly macademised. There are, of course, many shops which are no better than booths or open stalls in an exhibition without their show of respectability. There are court houses Civil and Judicial, educational institutions which are run in wretched buildings, bazars but not markets, carts, hackney carriages, and also a few private cars owned only by the biggest Government officials or by those who want to claim kinship with modern culture, modern society, and modern everything. Unfortunately, these private aristocrats have little culture

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in them except probably the sense of superiority over their fellow creatures who are modest pedestrians and dwellers in slum houses.

To a foreigner the city of Calcutta proves to be the most misleading index of Bengal. He thinks that a province which can have such a proud metropolis must be as good as Germany or France. But if he steps out of Calcutta only beyond Howrah or Sealdah, he can greet at once sights and scenes which will remind him of the darkest and most miserable picture of human habitations he has ever visited on the face of the earth. It is a fact that there is no second city in Bengal though ever since the partition days, the Eastern Bengal people have been flattering themselves with the idea that Dacca is the second city. If you visit Dacca, you can see for yourself that except the University buildings or the vast fields of Ramna, all else are the same old story or picture of dilapidated and antiquated houses, blind alleys and dirty lanes with a confusion of shops, school buildings, drinking stalls and bazars staring in the face like gaping wounds and buzzing in the ear like a disharmony of thousand voices. There is no comparison between Dacca and Calcutta. Calcutta is justly called London of the East as Bombay can be similarly regarded as second New York, because they have a sprinkling of modern industries, modern shops, modern ways of traffic, modern comforts and luxuries in some of the houses atleast, and also probably a smattering of the modern ideas and ways of life.

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But then, Calcutta does not mean Bengal, rather it means everything else but Bengal, because Calcutta is the only city in Bengal like Bombay or Colombo, Madras or Karachi where you can feel that you are in touch with the moving world, because in Calcutta there is everything which you can find more or less in every other big city of the world. The conditions of life in Calcutta and the occupations of the people, and also their very ways and manners are quite different from those of their fellow brothers living in any other part of the province. It should not sound strange in the ear of a foreigner that Calcutta is most unlike in every respect to any other place in Bengal or that its people are also quite different intellectually, financially, morally, industrially, and every other way by which human beings can be judged. Calcutta is intellectually most advanced, industrially most well-equipped, financially most wealthy, and morally most corrupt and demoralised like all big cities where the business magnates, the party politicians, the society coxcombs and the blooming belles, the professional cheats and swindlers play their crowning tricks upon their poor victims.

As in the eyes of a foreigner so also in the eyes of an Indian who has not seen the whole of Bengal or any of its district towns or villages, Calcutta would always be a wrong index. Being bred and brought up all my life in Bengal but while sitting at Lahore, I cannot think of Bengal even in her worst days when she is passing through her greatest crisis of starvation, destitution and death, that she is suffering in the least in any of her towns

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or villages or that any of my brothers and sisters who are hundreds of miles away from Calcutta is actually dying of hunger though every day I am reading in the papers that the food famine is sweeping over the whole province and taking its utmost toll. The cries of thousands of the dying or the dead do not reach me here, or even if they reach me, I feel that they are not the cries of the whole of Bengal but of Calcutta alone, because Calcutta is the metropolis of the province, the centre of gravitation of the dying race of Bengal.

India is such a vast country ; she has in her such a variety of geographical boundaries, such a medley of races, such a confusion of languages, such a conflict of religious faiths, such a heterogeneity of dress and manners that one feels as if one is lost in a wilderness without any hope of deliverance. Even the big cities and the towns of India offer a picturesque view of the various conflicting currents of life concealed beneath the mask of culture and education, refinement and politeness, brotherhood and friendliness. In spite of the professed claims for unity, in spite of the honest desire to build up a common fellowship of the races and the communities, in spite of the cementing influence of the British rule and English education, every Indian finds himself as much a stranger to his fellow citizens or fellow countrymen just as the Germans do in presence of the Russians or the Japanese feel in association with the Chinese. It is a fact that a Bengalee does not feel at home in the Punjab or that a Madrasite feels really miserable in U. P. or even a Bombay man, who is more Catholic in his views and ways of life

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than any other Indian, cannot find much delight in any of the sights or sounds of Southern India. That is why, I am obstinate in my belief that Indians can never unite into one nation even if they were politically free. Whoever may be responsible for the territorial demarcations, provincial partitions, communal conflicts, it cannot be denied that Indians are not one race, that they have not got the same political ideology or even that they have got the same culture as the Americans or any of the European nations can claim to possess.

But India is one and the same at least in one respect—in her backwardness, in her poverty and destitution, in her bondage and slavery, in her sorrow and unhappiness. Of course, so long we have been under the British rule, we have been feeling our bondage as much better than independence of other nations under a Hitler or a Mussolini, though at the same, we have been feeling all the while that we would have been probably much happier if we were absolutely free from any foreign rule. Herein I differ with my countrymen, not because I am a lesser patriot than any of them nor because I am an incorrigible spiritualist like Mahatma Gandhi, but because I find before my very eyes how the people of the native States of my country are clamouring against misrule and tyranny, exploitation and treachery. Then again, when I look at the various communal bodies, political assemblies, and the quarrels and strifes following them always close at their heels, I feel sincerely

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disgusted with all my aspirations to be free, and unconsciously become an infatuated slave to the benign influence of the British rule and British culture under which we have lived so peacefully for atleast two centuries.

But British rule has not been able to mitigate all the miseries and sorrows of our life. India is not a country but a continent, and it is so huge a continent that it would require atleast another half a century to bring it up to the level of any of the most modestly advanced countries of the Western World. We, Indians have been always boasting of our ancient philosophy and religion. We have been boasting also of our spiritual ideals, moral character, and simple ways of life. But let us think for a while what we have in our philosophy or religion. Our philosophy can be summed up in one word—mysticism or confusion of logic. I admit that every philosophy in the world is speculative, but a philosophy which is based on no science must land itself in empty speculation as it has done in India in the case of the Vedantists, who in the ecstasy of their dreams believe that the world is an illusion, because they can not explain the phenomenal world which strikes them through their senses. How can one explain phenomena unless one knows and analyses matter? And one who can not explain matter must seek his shelter in the spirit. That is why, the ancient Indian philosophers were obliged

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by their ignorance to find their deliverance in spiritualism or idealism. But the western philosophers never tried to escape from the problem of matter, and that is why, they developed and cultivated first the various sciences and then they speculated on the problem of the spirit. Whatever conclusions they may have drawn are atleast based on facts, and therefore, perfectly rational. But Indian philosophy is a crude speculation based on a dreamy consciousness of things, and therefore, it is neither scientific nor rational. We may flatter ourselves on the authority of some German or English scholar that our philosophy is the noblest and sublimest form of speculative thought, but if we go to analyse it critically, we find nothing but confusion and inconsistency in the manner in which our ancient dialecticians have argued the various problems in the various *Upanishads*. In the first instance, what do the German or the English scholars know of our philosophy or how much of it can they understand even if they claim to know something of our Sanskrit language or have some approach to our holy scriptures? Besides, it is always a fact that a foreign scholar has a tendency to glorify things of other countries much beyond their actual significance or merit simply because he wants to immortalise himself by holding obscurity to light.

If we talk of Indian religion, we must think only of Hinduism and not of Islam and Christianity, which

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are nothing but alien faiths to our native soil. Every religion in the world is always the best and noblest on earth in the eyes of its followers and yet it is being derided and challenged by every other religion of the human race. Hindu religion may be the sublimest creed in the world, but just think for a moment what it has made of the Hindus—how it has degraded its followers by classifying them into the higher and the lower classes. The Brahmins who belong to the higher class have the right to read the *Vedas* and the *Upanishads*. They have the privilege to exercise authority over other classes not only in social and domestic affairs but also in every sphere wherever there is room for the exploitation of superstition and ignorance or for acquisition of personal gain or for the abuse of power and natural rights. It is the Brahmins who dictate that others will have to dine and marry within their own castes. It is they who prescribe for the Hindu widows a life of sorrow, insult, and privation until the poor creatures drop down into the grave. It is they who shut out the best portion and the most serviceable section of their own race from the common rights and privileges which even the birds and the animals enjoy as their birth-rights. Look at the untouchables, the depressed classes—the *Vaishyas* and the *Sudras*. What a life of humiliation and actual privation they suffer in their domestic and social affairs—how they are cruelly segregated from every nook and corner of the temple, the drawing-room,



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the house and the hearth, the public places, and if any of them ever dares transgress any of their bounds he is atonce penalised with ex-communication, which is a far worse punishment than imprisonment or exile.

Hindu philosophy may be very noble and sublime, but then, Hindu religion is most conservative and narrow in its outlook. It does not allow any kind of intercourse between man and man belonging to the same country, the same community, the same sect. Islam and Christianity may be selfish but they are tolerant, liberal and catholic, because they do not refuse to admit a heathen or an alien into their fold, whereas Hinduism in its original and ancient form never can think of conversion, assimilation, or adoption, but on the contrary insists on segregation, exclusion and excommunication. That is one of the chief reasons why during the space of a couple of centuries so many millions of the Hindus have been forced to divorce their own religious faith and embrace Islam and Christianity. Mr. Jinnah, who congratulates himself on the numerical strength of the Mohammedans in our country, forgets all the while that most of his brothers of the Moslem League are drawn from the Hindu fold. The Christian missionaries also should know that because of the liberality of their religious faith they have been able to draw so many of the Hindus into their ranks. Mahatma Gandhi discussed not only the virtues of Islam and Christianity but also the flaws of his own religion, and that is why, in order to save the vast

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multitude of the depressed classes or the untouchables he started his campaign against the conservatism of the Hindus and also succeeded immensely in diverting them from the temptations of Islam and Christianity. That is why, many of the shrewd critics suspect that Mahatma Gandhi is a great enemy to Islam as well as to Christianity although he professes openly to be no enemy to any creed or race or nationality.

Next to philosophy and religion we Indians talk too boastfully of our morality. We have seen how our spiritualism lands everybody on empty speculations and a selfish and cowardly retirement from the struggle for existence or from the stern duties and obligations of life as we find it richly illustrated in the lives of the professional sadhus, sanyasis, ascetics and hermits, who live either in human society or in the caves and jungles on the charity or exploitation of their fellowmen. We have also seen how our religion teaches us to hate our own fellow creatures and helps to create an eternal barrier not only between man and woman but also between man and man. When a Hindu boasts of his morality and character, he means that man is the sole arbiter of his fair partner in life whom he can enslave and tyrannise by subjecting her to all sorts of self-denial and self-sacrifice and monopolising for himself all the privileges of self-indulgence and self-enjoyment. Otherwise how can he marry twenty times or keep private and public concubines in the face of his beloved wife, and how at the same time can he afford either to put her behind the purdah twenty four hours or to deny her the choice of a

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second husband in his life-time or after his death or to burn her alive or exile or excommunicate her if she ever happens to exercise the least freedom of her body or soul? It is really strange, though it is perfectly true, that Indian women are Madonnas or Dianas, but they are so only under compulsion. If they were set free, as some of the city women are now enjoying some of the rights and privileges of human life in common with their male partners, I am afraid, they would cease to be angels and become creatures of flesh and blood with the same frailties and weaknesses which their sisters in other countries claim to possess as virtues in the eyes of the modern world.

So, with such a spiritual, religious and moral background in a country, it is easy to calculate India's immediate or remote future particularly when we know also the adverse circumstances against which she had fought and has yet to fight in order to gain her position in a world which is moving so fast in every field of thought and action. There is not a home in this country which does not feel discontented with its unhappy past or feel miserable on account of its wretched present or look dismally at its uncertain and gloomy future. There is not a soul in this land that does not realise most bitterly the impotency of its physical and intellectual powers or the bankruptcy of its material resources. Bengal famine is only a point in question amidst many other more acute problems of our national life, which have been troubling

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four hundred million souls for several centuries. It would be absolutely wrong to say that the Britishers have created these problems for us by their administration or legislation. The ills lie much deeper than any of our usual allegations or accusations against them. Let us not be prejudiced by what we have suffered in the hands of the British or any other people who have ruled over us during the last few centuries. On the other hand, if we count the progress we have made under British rule, we have reasons to congratulate ourselves and thank our rulers for what we have gained in culture and education, science and industries, political consciousness and social freedom and in so many other fields of human interest and welfare.

But even now after two centuries of British rule if we go out to visit the furthest corners of our country and study the lives of the people, do we not really feel how backward we are, how wretched our existence is? What is true of India is true of Bengal and of every other province, and the gloom deepens as we proceed in our task of analysis of the conditions of life in every city, town or village of this vast continent. As I have already said, Bengal is one of the poorest provinces in India, and the Bengalees are a dying race in spite of their fertile brains and high level of intellectualism in every field of human thought and culture. Bengal may be quite rich in her soil for the production

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of rice, jute, coal, iron, mica, manganese, timber, and other raw materials, and yet why is it that her people continually suffer from poverty, destitution and death from month to month and year to year? The reasons are not far to seek. Bengal is a river province. Leaving aside a minor portion of West Bengal, the whole of the province is a net-work of natural waterways that inundate and fertilise her soil and also help the transport of her commodities by means of boats and steamships. But these numerous waterways, when the heavy monsoon sets in and continues for at least six months in the year, often bring great calamities to the people in the form of floods and epidemics of diseases and also of the complete ruin of her golden crops. Due to the heavy monsoon in Bengal, water collects in every nook and corner of the district towns and the villages flooding the streets and the roads and immersing the brick-built houses or the thatched cottages with the result that the human inhabitants and the cattle are thrown out of their shelter and finally killed either by starvation or by infection of various diseases.

There is not a village or district town in Bengal in which you will not find innumerable ponds and ditches which become the hotbeds of malaria, cholera, dysentery and typhoid fever immediately after the ebbing of the flood during the monsoon season. Bengal has drawn

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from all parts of the world medical experts to carry on their researches in the various tropical diseases, and though they have succeeded fairly in finding out remedies for many of the ailments yet they have hopelessly failed in saving the human and animal souls that die in thousands every year either normally or during an epidemic.

Every Indian knows what conditions of life avail in the villages, but then, there are certain provinces such as Bombay, the Punjab, and Sind where village life is not so pathetic or wretched a picture as we find in Bengal. Any visitor to Bengal would be impressed by the city of Calcutta and also by the beauties and bounties of Nature particularly of a few districts of East Bengal where the green fields of golden crops, the big and long navigable rivers with thousands of boats and steamships plying over their bosom like swans and ducks, the wild forests teaming with precious timber and gorgeous animal life, offer a picture of luxuriance, health, and loveliness, which may naturally lead any visitor to think that Bengal is one of the richest and happiest lands on the surface of the earth.

But that is only one side of the picture. If one stays in Bengal in the villages, in the subdivisions, and even in the district towns throughout the year, one may notice how poor, destitute and miserable Bengal is. Of course, the climate of Bengal is equable—

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neither extremely hot nor extremely cold as that of the Punjab—and that is why, Bengalees can work in the fields or in the workshops throughout the summer without feeling easily tired or exhausted ; they can go without warm clothings and lie unprotected either on the street pavements or under the sheltered roofs without catching chill even in the coldest months of winter, though unfortunately, many of them die of Pneumonia, bronchitis and influenza because of their devitalised bodies due to starvation and hard work.

The rainy season is the worst season in Bengal. The monsoon begins in the month of May and ends in the month of September, and during the monsoon, there is not a street or a road in the district towns and in the villages which is not flooded all over with pools of water immersing the brick-built houses and the thatched cottages right above their plinth. It rains in Bengal in torrents for hours together and sometimes for days and weeks just as it does on the hills, but then, on the hills, as soon as the rain stops, the water runs down to the foot of the hills making everything dry on their top and sides where there are human habitations, whereas in the plains of Bengal, the water collects and stands for hours and days together long after the rains have ceased. The green fields of crops, and every stretch of land without any

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human dwelling, when completely immersed under water, may offer lovely sights to the gazer, but then, to the poor cultivator who has to depend for his sustenance on the crops, the whole thing spells disaster, because heavy monsoon or flood means a complete ruin of the crops in the fields and also a violent outbreak of epidemics in the human localities of such diseases as cholera, typhoid, malaria, dysentary, hookworm etc.

After the rains in Bengal the streets and the roads become absolutely unnavigable by the pedestrians or by those who drive in coaches or cars. Even in the city of Calcutta where there is a regular underground sewerage work for drawing out the filthy and foul water from every house and corner, all the streets and the roads are flooded with water and most of the buildings are found immersed atleast knee deep, particularly in those localities where the level of the land is comparatively low, and then the citizens are found to ply small boats in order to carry on their business, while in other localities the pedestrians plod their way through the water with their dhotis and shirts tucked up right up to their waist or knees making a sight for the gods. The tram cars and the motor cars and all kinds of vehicles are seen either stranded in the mid-street or plying their way splashing water on all sides. It is a fact that even in Calcutta



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the water after heavy rains keeps standing in some localities for several hours making traffic and communication almost an impossible task.

One can well imagine what happens to the district towns and the villages during a heavy monsoon in Bengal. The villagers are the worst sufferers because they live in mud houses or in thatched cottages—the walls or roofs of which are either dissolved in the flood or blown off by the strong wind. In Bengal rains are mostly accompanied by cyclones and storms which blow off the cottages and the trees and drown hundreds and thousands of boats in the rivers. The months of June and July are notorious for such devastating cyclones, and the poor villagers are robbed of their shelters, cattle, and crops almost every year. Those who have lived in Bengal villages in a heavy monsoon must have noticed how the villagers are huddled together with the cattle under unprotected shelters with their walls slowly crumbling down and their roofs leaking in several places. The poor inmates of the dwellings, particularly the women and the children, are the most pathetic sight. Even while the rain is pouring in torrents, the fire has got to be made and the food has got to be cooked, but where is the dry space in the whole of the ruined cottage to accommodate the fire and keep it alive in order to cook the vegetables and boil the rice? The

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half-clad women and the nude children shiver at every gust of the cold wind. For days and weeks they have got to weather the storm and the rains with no clothes or fire to warm their bodies and with practically no food to fill their bellies. The poor mother draws desperately her tiny bleating infant into the warmest corner of her bosom but fails to lend it any warmth with the rags of her linen which is drenched from end to end with the rains. To crown the misery in the night, the thatched roof keeps on leaking through thousand holes and the howling wind goes on shaking the whole cottage to its very foundation and threatening to bury alive the shivering and famished inmates.

There is no sunshine even for one whole week during the monsoon in Bengal. Most of the roads and streets in Bengal are not metalled or macadamised, and hence, after the rains, they become thick with mud. There is not a single district town in Bengal, leaving aside the villages, where during the rains, people have not to wade knee deep in the mud or waist-deep in the water. The Bengalees are used to such inconvenience. Their only prop in the rainy season is the umbrella, which they use either to balance their bodies in the slippery mud or to protect their heads against the pouring rains. All pedestrians in Bengal have to go bare-foot during the rains, and while attending or returning from

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the office, they have to take a heavy bath and change their clothes in order to remove the fast-clinging mud.

In the villages during the monsoons the people have to use boats almost everywhere either for tending the jute and corn fields or for carrying their vegetables and other loads of food stuff to the village market, which in the rainy season, is a floating bazar of boats in the glades of bamboo trees or on mounds of accumulated ruined cottages whose inmates have been washed away by the flood or starved to death by famine. Those who can not afford the luxury of boats make an apology of floating vehicles either with big earthen pots or with the trunks of banana trees or sometimes with rotten wooden planks tied together with ropes. Every village in Bengal in the rains is a deep lake, and after the rains, is a bog of mud and decomposed vegetable matter, which sends out its foul and filthy stench and contagions of diseases to take the toll of human and animal lives in hundreds and thousands every year.

Of course, the tale of village life in Bengal as in other provinces of India is practically the same only with the difference that the monsoon brings more miseries to the Bengalees than to other races, and leaves them open to the ravages of flood, famine and epidemic diseases. Malaria is most rampant in Bengal because the mosquito finds its comfortable cradle in

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the ponds and walls and the pools of water to breed the larva which grows in millions to suck the blood and inject poison into the devitalised bodies of the human and animal victims. Cholera spreads like a wild fire, and dysentary and typhoid take their heavy tolls because there is no dispensary, no medical aid, no sanitary arrangement in any of the villages of Bengal inspite of the great researches of tropical diseases in Calcutta and also of the crowd of doctors and physicians in the district towns of the province. Firstly, there is no good communication between the villages and the towns. Secondly, there is no sufficient co-operation between the Government and the people during epidemics. Thirdly, the villagers are too illiterate and superstitious to realise the value of hygiene or the efficiency of modern medical aids. Fourthly, the economic condition of Bengal is probably at its lowest 'ebb in the villages. All these factors are equally responsible for the ill-health, ill-nourishment, and ill-development of the Bengali race, which has been dying fast for the last fifty years in spite of its intellectual and other advancements.

In every country it is the village and not the town or the city that counts in the development and growth of a race or a nation. In my opinion, India has been and is being neglected in the villages, and that is why, she is decaying day by day inspite of the benevolent

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aids of the Government to develop the industries, to improve the sanitation, to advance the education of the people. That is why, Mahatma Gandhi and all the political leaders of our country have been stressing the need of village uplift in all their campaigns. It is a cruel irony of the Indian mind that in spite of our full consciousness of the wretchedness of village life which forms the real backbone of the Indian nation we flock to the towns and the cities, neglecting and wasting our resources, and paving the way to our final ruin. It is, therefore, the duty of the people as much as the duty of the Government to divert this disastrous tide of town-life into the rustic channels and try to build up the nation by saving the villagers who possess the potentialities of best citizenship and most glorious national life.

## CHAPTER II

### Occupations of the people of Bengal

IT has become almost proverbial that the chief ambition of the Indians is to be clerks, and it is probably literally true to say that Bengalees are born to be clerks because it was they who became the first race of clerks when the British rule established itself first in Bengal. There is, of course, nothing derogatory in being clerks because in India even the highest officials in most of the Government departments are nothing but dignified clerks. It was the special privilege of the Bengalees to learn English first from the East India Company, and it was certainly creditable on their part to read and write English better than other Indians. Even these days when English education has spread so widely all over India, Calcutta is considered as the best and highest centre of English education and scholarship as Oxford is regarded as the fountain head of all competent researches in the English language and literature. It is an open secret that Calcutta University graduates are preferred to all other Indian University graduates in matters of educational

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appointments in the department of English either in schools or in colleges or in universities. It is also a fact that of all other provinces in India, Bengal has been most influenced by English education and culture though in the eyes of the casual observer she may appear to be callous to the English ways of life and manners.

But clerkship is not the only occupation of the Bengalees. If you study Bengali life at Calcutta you can find that there is no occupation on earth which the Bengalees do not follow or in which they have not achieved a considerable success by their industry or skill. Like the Government and private offices of every branch, every department of industries and commerce, every technical and non-technical profession has been captured and crowded by the Bengalees. Even politics has become a profession to the Bengalees, though it has unfortunately put them in the black book of the Government, because Bengalees have been always misguided by false communism, fatal terrorism, and secret anarchy. But then, it is also true that no race in India has proved so efficient, so loyal, and so true to the Government for carrying on administration of the country. If the Punjab can be regarded as the sword arm of India, Bengal can be regarded with equal credit as the brain force of India—both of which have been immensely serviceable to the Government for internal administration in times of

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peace as well as for external adjustment in times of war.

As Bengal is most highly intellectual, her people naturally excel others wherever there is a competition of the intellect, such as in law, medicine, engineering, philosophy, diplomacy, administration and in other works of the brain. They are also exceptionally good in the fine arts such as literature, painting, music, dancing, sculpture, architecture, and a few other branches which require the artistic sense and skill. But they are hopelessly deficient in trade and industries, in any commercial enterprise, in fighting or in any kind of physical feat, probably because the climate of their province is enervating or their mental constitution is averse to materialism. Naturally, most people in Bengal follow every kind of occupation but not trade and commerce or fighting and winning victories in the battlefield. Of course, there are always exceptions. There are many business magnates in Bengal who have earned immense wealth as well as reputation like those in Bombay or in other provinces. There are many at present who have joined the Army and the Navy and the Air Force, and are proving their worth and skill and courage.

Bengal is quite rich in rice, jute, coal, iron, manganese, mica, timber, wood pulp and so many other raw materials. But the people of Bengal depend for their sustenance more on agriculture than on anything



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food grains yet they cannot hoard beyond what they get or earn by their wages from the landlords. The quantity of their stock is so small that it cannot last them beyond a few weeks. That is why, whenever there is flood or famine, the villagers rush to the neighbouring towns or cities in order to find food and shelter, but unfortunately, they forget that nothing can be had in towns or cities without money which they do not possess. Therefore, they have to face nothing but starvation and death as they are now facing at Calcutta and in most of the district towns of Bengal due to shortage of foodstuff

Those who live in the towns and the cities are not equally rich, rather most of them live from hand to mouth due to their limited wages and expensive ways of life. Hence, whenever, there is any food shortage in any city of Bengal or of any other province in India, three-fourths of the population run the risk of facing starvation for want of their purchasing capacity which for the average Indian amounts to ten rupees per head per month. If due to inflation or any other cause the prices of commodities shoot up to abnormal heights, how can the average Indian particularly in the poorer provinces like Bengal, Behar, Orissa, and U.P. afford to survive the crisis? Unless the Government controls the foodstuff and other barest necessities of life, and unless there is a proper and immediate distribution of the articles in the

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affected areas, there is no chance of saving the dying souls. Charitable and philanthropic organisations at the time of the crisis can contribute something to the relief of the sufferers, but they cannot completely save them from the disaster.

In Bengal the percentage of high education is much larger than that in other provinces whereas the percentage of primary education is much lower, and that accounts for the comparative economic distress of the province even in normal times. Most of the villagers in Bengal are absolutely illiterate, and that is why, they cannot take to any public or private profession which is monopolised by the highly educated classes in the district towns and the cities.

Consequently, the villagers have got to depend upon agriculture alone for their sustenance, and in case of any failure of crops, they have to face an immediate starvation which the citizens of Bengal and other provinces can avoid for a much longer period. At the present food crisis in Bengal it is not the citizens of Calcutta or other district towns who are dying, but it is the poor villagers who have neither any stock of food grains nor any purchasing capacity that are running to the towns and the cities only to collapse on the street pavements or to breathe their last in the relief hospitals organised by the Government and the public bodies.

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High education in India has unfortunately been misdirected. In England or in America nobody goes in for high education unless one is specially adapted to it, whereas in India everybody believes in securing as many university paper stamps as possible without considering for a moment whether they would land them in a blind alley or in any fruitful work after the completion of their education. To speak the truth, high education has no value unless it is equipped with some vocational training or unless it is directed to the development of trade and industries. It is no good bringing out every year medical or engineering or law graduates unless there is scope for earning their livelihood. . It is no good opening merely technical institutions in the country unless there are also factories, mills and workshops to utilize fruitfully the raw materials for the purpose of manufacturing useful articles for foreign export or for national consumption. It is a cruel irony of fate that India is so rich in raw materials and yet she is so poor financially. The reason is that our raw materials are exported while the finished products of other countries are imported into our land making ourselves only day-labourers in the fields and in the workshops. Unless and until the export of precious raw materials is stopped and proportionately the import of foreign finished goods is also discouraged, there is no way of improving the financial condition of our country.

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In Bengal more than in any other province the people suffer from acute economic distress simply because they export so much of their jute produce, their coal and timber, their cotton and rice, and also because they are not so much interested in the development of trade and industries as the people of the Punjab, Bombay, Sind and other provinces. Due to lack of education in the villages as well as due to want of financial help no industry has been able to develop or flourish in Bengal. The Government has been very wisely trying to keep the villagers engaged throughout the year with some kinds of cottage industries which keep them alive atleast for six months in the year when there is no cultivation of jute or rice. But then, the people of Bengal are averse to all kinds of trade or industries. They are fond by tradition of public professions, and particularly of office jobs—Government or private—which make them peculiarly unfit for any kind of business speculation or commercial and industrial training. That is why, we find all over India Bengalees occupying high or low seats in the various Government offices and feeling contented with their lot, however miserable and unhappy otherwise they may be. Very few of the Bengalees are found to venture out like the Sindhis or the Punjabees or the Marwaris to earn their life's fortune beyond India or even beyond their native province

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by means of any commercial or industrial enterprise. Most of the Bengalees, who have left their homestead under pressure of circumstances, have taken either to teaching or to medical or legal practice or to some clerical or administrative job in some office, but very few of them have tried their luck on business. Therefore, it is but natural that in the event of any economic crisis, Bengal should be the first to suffer and suffer mortally.

## CHAPTER III

### Bengal's Strength and Weakness

THE very fact that Bengalees are not a race of traders or *banias* reflects that they are not selfish but charitable and generous, that they are not so materialistic as the people of Bombay, Sind and the Punjab nor are they adventurous and speculative as it is required of every trading or commercial race. It also reflects that they are ease-loving and peaceful, home-sick and full of love and affection and fellow-feeling, not only for their own kith and kin, but also for strangers and foreigners. That is why, nowhere in India as in Bengal there is so much of encouragement of the professional beggars and mendicants and there is a such a wide-scale organisation of helping the orphans, the widows, the paupers, the cripples, the homeless, and the destitute. Like that fabulous king of charity, Data Karna, in the Mahabharat, the Bengalees give away their all in charity to others. It is not a fiction but a downright fact that in the village homes of Bengal, even when there is nothing for the inmates to eat, the people borrow rice

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or vegetables from their neighbours to feed and entertain their guests. Of course, such charity or benevolence is not the monopoly of the Bengalees but it is the universal characteristic of the Indians, who are by nature philanthropists and social servants. It does not mean that Indians are not selfish or totally indifferent to their personal interests. Most of the town people or citizens in India, as all over the world, are extremely selfish and mean and even cruel and inhuman. But then, there are few towns or cities in our country where materialism has completely robbed the people of their milk of human kindness. And besides, Indians live mostly in the villages, and proverbially, the villages are far more charitable, generous, and self-sacrificing than the towns and the cities.

In Bengal, Sunday is the day when every family distributes alms freely to the poor beggars according to its own means. Besides, there are countless *Asrams* or semi-religious and semi-social organisations to which the people of Bengal regularly and magnanimously contribute for helping the cause of the poor and the crippled, the destitute and the homeless. In the Punjab and also in Southern India one comes across *Dharamsalas* or rest-houses for the weary travellers, but in Bengal every house is a *Dharamsala* to the casual or regular visitors from any part of the province or of the country.

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As the Bengalees have a tendency to other worldliness and spiritualism and aversion for materialism, so they follow a life of extreme simplicity and modesty, not under any painful necessity but out of their love for plain living and high thinking. The Bengalees are undoubtedly a race of *Fakirs* in their food and dress, and of princes in their high thinking and philosophical speculation. Their high intellectualism is responsible for their speculative bent of mind and also for their comparative indifference to worklikeness. Bengalees are not dreamers except in art and literature, but they are most critical dilecticians in the world of moral, religious, and spiritual thought. But then too much of intellectualism and speculative thought has led the Bengali race to a state of physical inaction, which is so fatal an obstacle in the way of individual or collective progress that the Bengalees, with all their learning and culture, their moral and spiritual excellence, their love for their motherland and their countrymen, are now a dying race.

The Punjab is just the reverse to Bengal in this respect. The Punjabees are sportive and at the same time they are most practical and materialistic, and that is why, they are not inclined to sentiments of love, affection, fellow-feeling or any kind of affairs of the heart. They are not keenly intellectual nor are they speculative, idealistic or spiritual in their ways of thinking. They



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believe only in bodily existence and material advancement, and that is why, they have the possibilities of being the greatest of all the Indian races. On top of all, they possess an exuberance of vitality and physical energy which makes them good fighters in the battle-field, excellent sportsmen, and also tolerable businessmen. If they could combine the high intellectualism and spiritualism of the Bengalees with their own physical energy and material ambitions, they would compare favourably with any of the leading races in the world. It is a strange law of nature that the weak always attracts the strong and *vice versa*, and that is why, there is such a great affinity between Bengal and the Punjab. The Bengalees are by nature physically weak. It may be partly due to the enervating influence of their climate and partly due to their food, which lacks in vitamin, or it may be, who knows, due to the very peculiarity of the soil, which varies with the change of geographical boundaries. The Bengalees like the Madrasis and the Beharis and other south Indian races are five feet swarthy dwarfs, while the Punjabees alone in India are a race of well-featured, bright-complexioned, strong and healthy giants, who have measured their knuckles against practically all the bravest and toughest races of the world in the great theatres of War in Africa, Europe, and in the Far East. The Sikhs of the Punjab stand towering even over the stalwart Russians and are more formidable fighters

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than the Germans and the Japanese in land or water or in the air. India can boast of other brave races who have fought and won several battles in the past. The Gurkhas, the Rajputs, the Dogras, the Gharwals, the Jats—all are a terror in the eyes of the enemy either in the Far West or in the Far East. And it is, therefore, a great luck for the British people to get the services of such valiant soldiers in winning the present War.

But the Bengalees can never be fighters because they are physically so weak and mentally so averse to any kind of combat except with the pen or with the tongue. Of course, they can be good stratagists because of their power of observation and sound judgment. The Bengalees can make good commanders in spite of their physical deficiency and unimposing appearance as they have already proved to be the best administrators in India. If the physical strength of the Punjab could be regulated by the brain power of Bengal, they could form an invaluable asset to the Government in achieving perfect order and harmony in the country. But unfortunately, the Bengalees are most indifferent to all affairs of the body, and therefore, they hate to be soldiers, businessmen, sportsmen, while they delight greatly in being artists, philosophers, diplomats, and in playing so many other roles which require a thinking mind and a feeling heart and other perceiving senses.

The Bengalees are said to be the greatest patriots

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of all other Indians, but that is not true. No race in India has been so much denationalised by western culture as the Bengalees. In my opinion, no race in India is or can be patriotic because of the heterogeneity of elements in the Indian nation. The greatest evidence of this lack of patriotism is the lack of unity amongst the various races. People are often misled by the terrorist and other anarchical movements in Bengal to think that the people of this province have got the greatest love for their land and can lay down their lives for its emancipation. I consider all political leaders in our country as more or less self-interested persons, because every one of them is found to champion the cause of his own party or sect or community, and at any psychological moment, he is ready to swallow the bait of any tempter whoever happens to lure him with leadership. The history of all the political bodies in India repeats the same old tale of changing camps and playing the turn-coat. Therefore, Bengal is no honourable exception to the general rule which applies to all India.

But the Bengalees have got one virtue—to make the greatest sacrifice for others whatever may be the stake. I am not talking of the political leaders who renounce everything for the sake of mere leadership. I personally hate those who want to make politics their career and rise in the eyes of the foolish superstitious multitude without helping their cause in the least. As a matter of

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fact, politics is the greatest menace to the modern world, because it leads to internal quarrels, ill-feelings and personal enmities and also to external strifes, feuds and wars which can have no end unless all the politicians of the world with their latent progenies are completely wiped out from the face of the earth.

But the Bengalees are politicians by misguidance. Due to the enervating influence of the climate, due to bad food, due to morbid temperament which is close cousin to ill-health and devitalised bodies, and due also to poverty and economic stress, the Bengalees are tempted to dabble in politics, and when they fail in the open combat, they are impelled by all the conspiracy of circumstances to take to secret organisations and under-hand means, which in their turn bring upon their heads all the penalties and persecutions of law and make them desperate and miserable failures in life in the long run. There are cases of the terrorists and anarchists in Bengal, who have ruined not only their own lives and their families but also have pushed back their very native land by atleast half a century in her way of emancipation and freedom.

The Bengalees are self-sacrificing, generous, and philanthropic because they are sentimental and also because they are themselves a race of sufferers. By the light of their imagination as well as by virtue of their

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personal experiences in every field of human existence, they can realise more keenly and quickly than others the sorrows and sufferings of the poor and the destitute, the diseased and the crippled. If you visit Bengal during any famine or flood or out-break of an epidemic, you can find youngmen and women working in the relief camps day and night, distributing food and cloth and attending the sick-bed without any rest or even without taking any food or drink for themselves. The young people forget their own parents, brothers and sisters, and leaving aside all their own affairs they rush to the scene of destitution and suffering. Even the young girls take a great delight in coming out from behind the *Purdah* and taking part in the service of the starving and groaning souls. They give up their ornaments and fine clothes, leave behind them all their senses of dignity, aristocracy, learning and wealth, and plunge themselves headlong into the great humanitarian work. It is a pleasing sight to behold hundreds of youngmen and women working like brothers and sisters in the same camp.

There is probably no parallel in the world to the Bengali women in their homely virtues, particularly the virtue of self-sacrifice. The Hindu mother or wife or sister in Bengal is an incarnation of love, affection, kindness, faithfulness, piety, and also of moral and religious virtues

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which make her more innocent than Madonna, more chaste than Diana. A foreigner can never imagine to what extent a Bengali mother can sacrifice herself for the sake of her child or a Bengali wife can surrender her comforts and liberties to please her husband or a Bengali sister can forget all her joys and pleasures to make her brother happy. It is really a fact that all the human virtues in the world have been concentrated in Indian womanhood and not in Indian manhood, not because man has always played the tyrant and woman, the victim, but because there is something in the blood of Indian womanhood which makes them angels on earth as compared with the entire sisterhood of the world.

In every home of Bengal you can see how the mother tends the child twenty four hours watching its smiles and cries in perfect health or in sickness, how she denies herself even her food and drink if her little minion is not in the best cheer, how she rejoices and feels blessed when she finds it crawling on all fours or stumbling on two legs while learning to walk. You will say that every mother in the world behaves in the same manner, but certainly not. I have seen mothers in Bengal starving literally for days together when their children are sick or looking most melancholy or when their little infants do not smile. I have seen also other mothers, who belong to our country but who have been considerably

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influenced by the western ideas and ways of life, resigning their tiny babies to the care of matrons or governesses and going out to pictures or parties without feeling for a moment that they have left something behind them at home. But the Indian mother, and particularly the Bengali mother would never entrust her little infants or children to anybody but to herself and keep them closest to her bosom as if the whole world were conspiring to snatch them away from her arms.

The Bengali wife never takes her meals unless her husband has taken it first. She keeps on waiting for the husband in the morning, in the afternoon, and in the night though the husband may have taken his food elsewhere or has been out for long hours. The convention may be inconvenient or even harmful, but look at the depth of feelings, the sublime sentiment of love and self-sacrifice behind the whole thing. Western womanhood would probably rebel at the very idea of such bondage to man, but to Indian womanhood it is no bondage but a divine form of service at the altar of conjugal love. In the same manner, the Bengali sister tends her little brother, and sacrifices her all for his happiness and welfare.

But unfortunately in the modern world love, kindness, friendliness, piety, fidelity, affection, fellow-felling—all are fast dying out. It may be, while I am writing this book, that hundreds and thousands of living

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souls are collapsing on the street pavements of Calcutta and of other district towns in Bengal in the very face of the great citizens who are feasting and enjoying all the pleasures and comforts of life in their private houses or in the public places. Even in India, which is proverbially known as the land of charity and benevolence, we can find these days many people closing their doors against the beggars, refusing to acknowledge the sorrows and misfortunes of their next-door neighbours or their nearest kith and kin, and sometimes committing acts of greatest unkindness and inhumanity upon their poor innocent fellowmen on the plea of law and justice, discipline and harmony, duty and responsibility. One should therefore not be in the least surprised if one hears of the big landlords squeezing out the last drop of blood from the poor homeless peasants, or the businessmen exploiting the hard worked labourers and making a capital out of their blood and miseries, or the affluent householders refusing to give even a handful of rice or wheat to the starving beggar.

It is a fact that while the food famine is raging in Bengal and taking such a heavy toll of human lives, the profiteers are out on their blood-hunting job to make their life's fortune by selling food grains through the black market at prohibitively high prices to the hungry souls who are eating these days all uneatable things as the soldiers do in the battlefield when there is a shortage



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of foodstuff in the military camps during the War. How many of us are being really moved by the pathetic tales or scenes of starvation and death which are being related to our ears or being enacted before our eyes? Parents are dying before their children ; husbands and wives are snatching the last morsel of rice from each other's mouth ; children reduced to skeletons by long starvation are fighting with dogs in the streets to share the broken crumbs of food thrown into the gutter ; many are collapsing on the roads and the streets or in the relief hospitals because they cannot resist further the pinch of hunger or swallow any grain of solid food when thrust into their choked mouth by benevolent hands.

That is the tale of Bengal, and the same tale shall repeat itself when the food famine will rage all over India if due measures are not being taken immediately. But Bengal is brave like England in moments of a crisis. The Bengalees are a race of bravest souls to face not only hunger and starvation but also tyranny and torture. Just before the French Revolution there was the same picture of hunger and starvation in the whole country of France, and it was soon followed by a revolution, which the history of Europe had never known before. But the Bengalees know how to suffer and suffer quietly. Not a single of the dying souls has ever raised his famished lips or fingers to accuse either man or God. Though the profiteers are making a capital

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out of the life-blood of the famished souls, though the private hoarders are shutting out cruelly the food grains from the hungry mouths, and though the Government inspite of its honest attempts to relieve the distress of the sufferers is failing to cope with the situation, yet the dying and the dead souls of Bengal are not cursing but blessing equally the noble benefactor and the cruel tyrant, the friend and the foe, the bloodsucker and the saviour. Herein lies the divinity of the Bengali race—the race of torch-bearers of our holy land, the race of pioneers in every field of thought, the race of poets, philosophers, scientists, artists, and even of politicians, who have given India a place in the modern world.

## CHAPTER IV

### The Natural Enemies of Bengal

BENGAL is supposed to be the richest province in India because of her big navigable rivers which fertilise the soil for agricultural purposes. The *Padma*, the *Brahmaputra*, the *Dhaleswari*, the *Buri Ganga*—all form a net-work of natural irrigation, which helps the luxuriant growth of jute plants and the widest cultivation of food crops in the furthest corners of the province. These big rivers also help the transport of all kinds of goods from place to place by means of steamships and boats. The railways are not so useful in Bengal as the steamships and the boats.

Then there is the heavy monsoon which begins in the month of May and ends in August and which helps further the cultivation of jute and rice in the districts and localities where the tributaries of the big rivers can not reach. But the monsoon inspite of its beneficial effects upon the soil sometimes works ruin upon the crops by deluging the cultivated areas and keeping them under water for too long a time, which leads finally to the

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failure of crops and a great famine. It is the monsoon which is entirely responsible for frequent floods in Bengal. It swells the big navigable rivers, which accumulating their devastating strength from the neighbouring or distant hills, sweeps away the villages with their men and cattle, all human habitations and trees into a mighty debris of the dying and the dead.

The districts which are seriously affected by flood at regular or irregular intervals are Midnapore, Contai, Bakharganj, Dacca, Faridpore, and a few others. Those who have not lived in the river provinces of India cannot imagine what a calamity a flood is. The *Padma* river in Bengal is supposed to be the biggest river in India. When it is full in the month of July, its banks become invisible, and the vast expanse of water looks like a sea or an ocean. But the *Padma* is the roughest river at places, and it is most treacherous too, because nobody knows which course it would take every succeeding year with the accumulation of its water from the monsoons or from the hills. I have traversed the *Padma* river at least hundred times on steamships or boats. I have seen how every time the banks were new and the water either receding from or encroaching upon new stretches of land with the result that hundreds of old human habitations were washed away suddenly in the night or in

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the day and new dwellings sprang up in the mid river bed as if by some spell of magic.

The *Brahmaputra* river which flows across Assam joins the *Padma* river in Bengal, and it is far more devastating because of its accumulated strength of waters drawn from all the hilly tracts of Assam. When there is a heavy monsoon in both the provinces, the two big rivers swell into mountains of roaring water and rush over the low plains sweeping away everything before them. The monsoon in Bengal is often attended by cyclones and heavy storms, which blow away the biggest steamships and thousands of the tiny boats, and stud the bosom of the *Padma* with millions of dead bodies of men, women and children, and carcasses of domestic animals—cows, buffaloes and horses. I still remember the cyclone of 1920 in East Bengal. I was then a stripling of nineteen and staying in my house at Wari in the city of Dacca. It was on the 24th of September the cyclone came and swept over most of the districts of East Bengal. The day preceding the great catastrophe looked dark and gloomy from morn till evening, but there was no shower, no thunder or lightning. It only drizzled now and then sprinkling the earth's face with little dew drops of rain. The weather looked quite calm but awful, because the sky was swollen with heavy clouds and seemed to betoken an unexpected change in the atmosphere. The evening gave

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us no foretaste of the fateful night. Even at 8 o'clock in the night the wind was hissing gently over the tops of the trees. We thought that it would rain heavily at midnight, but as the hours advanced, we found a distinct and rapid change in the weather. The wind began howling and roaring all of a sudden as if thousand lions were at war to drown their voices in the universal thunder. The rain came with its heavy-laden showers and pierced the walls and the windows with full grape-shots of fire. We were all awake as it was impossible to go to bed with such a dreadful war of elements outside. I tried to have a peep into the dark reeling night, but the moment I opened a window, the full blast of the roaring wind greeted my shrinking face with sharp sleet of fire and water. I grew for the moment perfectly blind and perfectly deaf. For one brief instant I caught a glimpse of the trees that looked like ghosts in darkness beating madly with arms against the roaring wind. There were streaks of fire in the sky though it was full midnight. I heard a confused sound of hissing and howling, and all earth seemed shaking under my feet. The doors and the windows trembled every moment as the squall came with full vengeance, and the whole house seemed tottering down into a heap of ruins though its walls were strong as steel. I watched eagerly the moving hands of the clock; they went on striking the long

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fateful hours without rest. I never dreamt that the storm would blow on till the break of day. It did blow as hard as ever till eight o'clock next morning. Even as late as that, the sky looked as dark as midnight, and I could neither see nor hear anything. The lights in the house had already gone out either due to main fuse or pole fuse. I feared every moment to be buried alive under the brick walls or swept away by the mad whirlwind. There was no moment for thought, tears or prayers. I held my breath as it were and watched the hands of the clock. When they struck nine thirty, Heaven's wrath slowly abated and the fury of the storm softened down until at ten thirty in the morning, the sun was faintly visible. I rushed out of my room and into the open street. A pathetic sight greeted my eyes. The trees were all blown down, the lamp posts were lying flat upon the streets with their wires snapped and turned into coils. The outer walls of many of the houses had fallen into confused heaps forming little mole-hills here and there. The huts and the corrugated iron sheds of the market place were strewn like feathers. As I walked further and further into the city, I found more horrible sights. Hundreds and thousands of children were buried alive under brickwalls and iron sheds during the night. The river *Buri Ganga* had gone far beyond the *Buckland Band*, and her bosom was strewn

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with hundreds of dead bodies, because all the boats and big barges had been sunk on the previous night.

Within a week's time of the cyclone, I happened to ply on a steamship from Narayangunj to Goalando—a distance of eighty miles. I have already given an idea of the immensity of the *Padma* river, and yet while I was steaming over her bosom, I noticed how at every distance of ten or twelve feet a dead body came floating by upon the water—all swollen and grown stiff and with gaping holes here and there made by the pecks of various fishes in the river. At certain places half-a-dozen dead bodies swarmed together as if a whole family lay asleep. For the whole day from one o'clock in the afternoon to seven o'clock in the evening my eyes watched the stream of dead bodies. It was a bad wakeful dream indeed. I came to know afterwards that most of the villages lying near or far from the river banks were all swept away by the raging flood, and no trace could be found of any human habitation or cattle or even of trees. During that cyclone, I think, *lakhs* of people died in the flood and many more died of hunger, disease, and destitution. The Government took immediate measures and also the people of the province lent their ready co-operation in relieving the distress of the sufferers.

Such cyclones and floods are not rare in Bengal but very frequent occurrences. Famine in Bengal is due either to flood or draught and more frequently due to the former than to the latter incident. Generally the districts



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of Bankura, Birbhum, Murshidabad, Noakhali, Tipperah fall frequent victims to famine. It is a queer irony of the Bengal soil that unless there is a heavy monsoon every year there is a failure of crops which means famine at least in some of the districts of the province. Of course, it is the policy of the Government as well as of the people to keep a reserve stock of food-grains in the district and village granaries to meet any emergency if it at all arises, but then, when the catastrophe comes and it comes so suddenly and in such a wide scale that sometimes it becomes rather difficult to cope with it. But fortunately, there had been few occasions in the past when the Government or public relief work failed to save the sufferers.

The present food situation in Bengal is therefore an unprecedented calamity in the history of the province or of the whole country, and if the Government is yet unable to cope with the situation in spite of the ready co-operation of the people, one should not be very much surprised considering the complexity of adverse circumstances against which the agents of humanitarian service have got to work. I can realise the difficulties of transport, the risks of drawing food-grains from other provinces and also of cutting down a good portion from the rations of the troops who should by all means be better fed and better clothed for the defence of our country. I can realise also other factors such as inflation, control of food prices, private hoarding, abnormal growth of population, mal-

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distribution of food-grains in the country, and a few others that have given rise to this crisis in Bengal and is threatening to create the same situation in Bihar and Orissa, Madras and Southern India.

But famine and flood are not the only enemies of Bengal. Though Bengal is comparatively free from earthquakes, locusts, and other pestilences yet her greatest enemy is probably malaria which takes the heaviest toll every year from her villages as well as from her towns and cities. Everybody knows that mosquito is the real root of malaria. But how this little vermin came to be imported into Bengal in such great battalions? The reason is simple. As I have already pointed out that Bengal is a river province, and it has a heavy monsoon almost every year, and that there are innumerable ponds and wells in the villages and district towns. There are also big forests in many parts of the province. The Sundarbans is, of course, the deepest and biggest forest. All these factors help the breeding of mosquitos and the spread of malaria particularly during the rainy season, which is so favourable for the rapid cultivation of the vermins. Though the Government has taken due measures to clean the ponds and the wells and cut down many of the outstretching forests and also to provide the people with due medical aid and sufficient supply of quinine, yet thousands of people die every year and thousands more fall victims to the fast spreading pestilence.

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In my personal opinion Bengal can never be saved from malaria because stagnation of water can never be prevented after the heavy monsoons nor can the ponds and the wells be continually disinfected. Then there is the problem of the damp soil, damp atmosphere, and damp dwelling places. How can one prevent the breeding of the mosquito when even the atmosphere is so favourable? The mosquito grows not necessarily on stagnant water but also on the moist leaves, stones and bricks, and even on the moist ground. Of course, the spread or intensity of the malarial fever can be checked to some extent by using the mosquito net, by taking regular doses of quinine, and also by regulating the diet.

It is a misfortune that rice is the staple food of the Bengalees when the climate, the soil, and other natural conditions are so unfavourable to bodily health. Everybody knows that rice has no vitamin, and as such, it should be altogether discarded at least by the people of those provinces where the climate is moist. When I came to the Punjab in 1927 there was practically no malaria except in the few villages or districts lying nearest to the rivers or jungles, and I found the people of this province much healthier than now. I have noticed two great changes in the diet of the people here during the space of sixteen years. Formerly, very few of the Punjabees

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used to take rice except as a sweet dish but now many of them take rice just as the Bengalees do with their vegetables, meat and fish. As far as I have been able to study, I think, rice is not only a bad food but it is definitely injurious to health. Medical authorities have discovered after long and careful researches that rice is the cause of dropsy, beri-beri, appendicitis, pyorrhoea, and even of intestinal tuberculosis—all of which are serious and fatal diseases.

Another thing I have noticed in the diet of the Punjabees is that they are taking fast to tea and giving up milk, which is the most well-balanced and precious food in the world. It is because of milk, ghee and butter and also of wheat that the Punjabees are the healthiest and strongest race in India. But unfortunately, they are slowly giving up the best food and taking to the worst food, and I can safely certify that within another quarter of a century, they are likely to dwindle into a race of dwarfs and demi-human beings as the Bengalees, the Madrasis, the Beharis, and every other race in India who have already reached that level of physical degeneration due to their bad food, bad climate, and bad regulation of health.

In the case of the Bengalees, the risk of deterioration has already reached the climax. I think, the diet of the Bengalees and the Madrasis is the poorest in India. It is not because they cannot afford any better diet but

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because they are very orthodox in their views and tastes of food. I have travelled practically all over India, and wherever I have met Bengalees or Madrasis, I have found them sticking rigidly and obstinately to their own provincial diet, which is not at all suitable in other climates than their own. Even in the remotest Punjab, most of the Bengalees live entirely on rice, pulse and fish, and very few of them use ghee in vegetables and fewer still take milk or butter. That is why, inspite of the bracing climate of this province, they lose their health and fall victims frequently to diseases which are not ordinarily prevalent in the Punjab. If they could take plenty of milk and butter and ghee and also live entirely on wheat, I am sure, they could have improved immensely not only their own ricketty constitution but also that of their children who are proverbially a race of cripples and weaklings.

The next important thing which the Bengalees invariably neglect is the open-air life and physical exercise which work as a tonic to the human body as much as substantial food lends vitality to it. I have already said that Bengalees are no sportsmen. They are fond of the desk, the library, and the bed. Very few of them even during their student life take any physical exercise, not to speak of the popular games and sports in which the Punjabees take such a keen and active interest. It is a fact that the clerks and the school teachers of

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Bengal are the worst delinquents in the matter of physical exercise and outdoor life. From ten o'clock in the morning right upto six o'clock in the evening they work at the desk or in the reading-room, and thereby they impair not only their eyes but also their general health reaping indigestion in the day as well as in the night. Most of them suffer from chronic dyspepsia and nervous debility which finally lead them on to such a stage of deterioration of the body that they readily catch any of the infectious diseases and die a premature death.

The clerks and the school teachers inspite of their ill-health and lack of vitality are probably most prolific in producing children, because, as they say in Bengal, having nothing else to do and no other consolation in life, one must increase and multiply his race as fast as the bugs and the mosquitos breed. But then, such pious breeders must also consider the problems of over-population, racial degeneration, shortage of food, unemployment, and so many other complications which follow reckless and random breeding. It is our common experience that poverty brings more children, and too many children bring poverty. It is not merely in Bengal but practically in all the provinces of India except perhaps in the Punjab and the North Western Frontier provinces that Indians do not believe in birth-control either by mechanical contrivance or by moral discipline. Of course, the climate of the Punjab and the North

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Western Frontier provinces does not encourage any very undue indulgence in the act of procreation, but then, it should be no excuse for the people of other provinces to beget a race of weaklings or cripples or homeless orphans knowing full well that the income of the average Indian is hardly ten rupees per head per month. Nobody can deny that the population of India has increased abnormally during the space of last ten years. But then, unfortunately there has not been any proportionate increase of the income per capita, and that is why, India is bound to face the food problem sooner or later as Bengal is now facing it by paying a heavy toll of human lives.

Bengal has been already devitalised from generation to generation by her enervating climate, bad food, sedentary ways of life, over-indulgence in procreation, and want of physical exercise so much so that it is easy for her to play the victim to malaria, cholera, dysentery, typhoid, kalazar, and so many other diseases which have found their permanent cradle in her damp soil and moist air, in her polluted ponds and stagnant pools of water, in her jungles and forests, and also in her dirty and unhygienic human habitations. When Miss Mayo wrote her well-known book *Mother India*, she depicted in truest and most vivid colours all the plague spots of Indian life and particularly of Bengal life both in the villages and in the towns. Of course, Miss Mayo may

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not have the right to wash our dirty linens in a public place, but an Indian surely has the privilege to acknowledge openly as I am doing here with great sorrow and shame that whatever Miss Mayo has said about the health and hygiene of Indian life is true to the last letter, and yet I wonder, we do not feel ashamed of ourselves, instead of trying to improve our ways of life we feel proud of them and obstinately stick to them as if they were a part of our religion.

When cholera breaks out in a village, inspite of repeated warnings of the medical authorities, we neither take the precaution of inoculation against the infection of the disease nor do we care to follow even the commonest rules of hygiene to arrest the progress of the epidemic. I have seen with my own eyes in the villages as well as in the towns women washing the infected clothes of the cholera patients in the ponds or in the wells from which they draw their drinking water. I have seen also how the stools of such dangerous patients are being thrown anywhere and everywhere either on the roadside or behind the kitchen or near the well which is most frequented by all sorts of people. Naturally, the epidemic spreads like wild fire in the shortest possible time and sweeps away hundreds and thousands of the poor rustic souls whom even God cannot save from their doom. Besides, even when there is a violent outbreak of cholera in a village or town, people do not take care of



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their food. They eat all sorts of eatable and uneatable things and also those which are most unclean and poisonous from the hygienic point of view. The villagers all over India are in the habit of taking stale food because it saves them cooking. They eat stale boiled rice, stale cooked vegetables, stale fish and meat, stale milk and curd, and most of all, stale sweetmeats which are preserved in the dirtiest manner in the shops or in the houses. Even while they are suffering from blood dysentery or para-typhoid or dysorrhoea, they do not hesitate to swallow the most forbidden things and in the most unclean manner. In spite of education and culture Indians are peculiarly superstitious about their food and drink, and particularly about their manner of attending or treating the sick. What Miss Mayo has said about the ways of life of our women and children is more than true. She has given a graphic description of the scenes in our nurseries, kitchens, bed-rooms, bath-rooms, latrines, and in every nook and corner of our domestic life. How horridly and yet how truly she has painted the pathetic plight and the wretched condition of the prospective mother just on the eve of her delivery when she is confined to a rat-hole and consigned to a witch-like mid-wife !

But Indians are Indians. They can never learn lessons from others because they have the obsession in their head that every foreigner is their enemy or a commissioned agent of the bureaucracy to hold a candle to their shame

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as Miss Mayo was suspected when she brought out her immortal book. Bengal is not more superstitious than other provinces but she is more obstinate than others in yielding to changes or interferences from outside. That is why, Bengal inspite of her high intellectual advancement, inspite of her great culture and catholicity of heart, has been playing the same old victim to all kinds of absurd conceptions of health and hygiene, moral and social discipline, religious and spiritual virtues, and even of economic and political problems. Of course, she is the unhappiest province in health, climate, trade and industries, material resources, communal harmony, and even in winning the graces of her rulers. If I were an artist, I would have painted Bengal with a big swollen head and a skeleton trunk, with skinny arms and legs and of course with a hungry look in the eyes sunk into the sockets but wearing an eternal curse that would seem to speak, "Suffering is the badge of our tribe but God watches them with greater care who have been sinned more against than sinning."

## CHAPTER V

### Is Bengal a dying Province ?

After having read the preceding chapters, one may naturally inquire about the ultimate fate of Bengal. Somebody in Bengal long years ago, wrote a book under the title *Why the Bengalees are a dying race*. I read it in my school days and I do not remember either the name of the writer or the contents of the book in detail. But I remember distinctly that the book was a note of warning to the people of Bengal—a warning which is sounded generally by a dark prophet who discovers the first symptoms of decay and death in living things. That the Bengalees just a quarter of a century ago were the most living race in India nobody can deny. Other races in India came into life much later than that, and there are many of them who are yet in a state of semi-consciousness, which will take long years to reach the height of life and energy which the Bengalees have lived and lost.

I must go back into the history of Bengal at least fifty years ago when my father was a youngman and I was yet unborn. I am told that in those days rice used

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to be sold at one rupee for thirty or forty seers in almost all parts of Bengal. Milk was available at one pice per seer, while fish and egg and meat could be had for no money, because every householder had his fowls and goats, and every village had its pond as the common reservoir for all. I have also seen with my own eyes rice being sold at two rupees per maund and milk available at three pice per seer in the district of Dacca, Bakhargunj. Mymensingh, and Rajshahi where now both the commodities have probably reached their vanishing point.

In those days there were not so much of taxes on any of the articles which people need for their bare existence, and as for the luxuries nobody cared to enjoy them because they were not made in our country but imported from abroad. And besides, the people very rarely complained of any kind of serious illness which could not be cured by the old Indian Ayurvedic system. Probably, the modern diseases which have become so popular in the modern cities and towns were completely unknown to the villages in which our parents or forefathers lived. That is why, my parents like others' parents have lived a life of eighty or ninety years with their teeth perfectly intact, their hair not turned grey, their arms and legs not crippled by gout or rheumatism, their eyes going without their glasses, and above all, their brain more sound and clear than ours.

Of course, in those days there were not so many

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graduates of the Calcutta University scattered all over the world and begging their wages as clerks or school teachers farthest away from home and for ever exiled from the native clime. Even a matriculate was then a curiosity in a district town, and a graduate was probably a sight for the gods. But now, who cares to look at the race of brilliant academicians who have no market value except by the back door? I have been told by my father that English education and Government service had the greatest attraction in those days as they still have it in the Punjab, North Western Frontier Province, Assam, and other provinces. In those golden days even a *chaprasi's* son or a butler's son-in-law could be a Deputy Magistrate and finally a Deputy Commissioner if he had the pluck or luck of being a matriculate. How divine was the encouragement of our rulers to make us a race of administrators, but now, due to our own fast breeding of graduates, what a supreme indifference we have to encounter in their benign face! It is not their fault but ours. From clerks they have raised us to the height of governors, and from rustic swans they have made us full-fledged civilians with the top-hat and the tail coat.

In my own school days I noticed what a craze we had for English education, English dress and manners, English culture, and English ways of life just as I now find in the Punjab the same frenzy sweeping through every head of boy and girl, every family and home in

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the village or in the town. It is the alchemy of a new and golden culture that tempts even the brutes in the wilderness to come out in the open and breathe the eternal sunshine. That is how Bengal was drawn out from her dark nooks and corners, from behind her *purdah*, from her sylvan homes of coconut and banana trees—she was drawn out like a shy maiden in the flush of her youth to adorn her limbs with new feathers, not as a sacrifice but as a proud trophy to the altar of a new faith, a new life, a new light, and a new world. Bengal drank deep of the fountain and felt blessed, because she was the first to taste the ambrosial liquid, which has flooded the whole of our country in the space of half a century.

But then, with the immortal drink came the great intoxication which carried the whole of Bengal off her feet. From the great depths of darkness and superstition she cried for liberty ! The voice echoed from one end of the province to the other, nay, even to the furthest corners of the whole country. It was but natural that having tasted once, having enjoyed for the first time, the fruits of English culture and the blessings of British rule, she panted for complete freedom from the yoke to which she had been tied for a couple of centuries. Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Iswar Chandra Vidya Sagar, Bankim Chandra Chatterjee, Rabindra Nath Tagore, Sir Ashutosh Mukerjee, Lord. S. P. Sinha, Dr. Jagdish Chandra Bose, Mr. C. R. Das, Sir P. C. Roy,

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and all the great heroes of Bengal, who had been deeply imbued with the light of the Eastern and the Western world, cried out in one voice that India should be politically free as she had been socially and culturally set free by the great philanthropists of the Anglo-Saxon race. Unfortunately, the other provinces were far behind Bengal in those days, and that is why, the whole country could not work in unision in submitting her appeal to the great tribunal for her deliverance. Bengal lost her patience, and in a fit of frenzy as it were, she plunged herself into a great movement of unrest, indiscipline, and lawlessness in which however only the misguided younger generations took part. I remember the days in Bengal when even the *Gita*, the innocent Bible of the Hindus, and the song of *Bande Mataram*, the national anthem of India, inspired the revolutionaries with a martyrdom as much as they created a great flutter and suspicion in the hearts of our rulers whose natural impulse was to maintain law and order in the province and who maintained it against thousand odds with their iron hands. When once the revolutionary spirit is kindled in the human breast, it forgets altogether the sense of right or wrong, and contemplates nothing but deeds of violence and secret conspiracy against its own benefactor with total disregard to one's own individual or collective welfare.

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That is why, Bengal has suffered so much in the hands of law and has been branded, not as the home of patriots, but as the den of secret conspirators, mad communists, underground revolutionaries, and ruthless terrorists. Mr. Subhas Chandra Bose, who had been banned and exiled by the Indian National Congress was the lost leader of the last band. And therefore, I say, politically, Bengal is now dead, and every body would have rejoiced in this unhappy death if one could notice in the Bengali race a feeling of harmony, common fellowship and brotherhood, which has been so sadly disturbed by the two conflicting elements in the population—the Hindus and the Muslims. Nowhere in India as in Bengal there have been so much of communal bickerings, so many riots and disturbances which have resulted merely in intensification of domestic and public quarrels. Bengal is dying to-day of starvation because she has no love for her own brothers, no faith in her common benefactors, no trust in the slow and steady process of deliverance that comes inevitably through long years of patience and suffering. But Bengal can be saved even yet if she forgets her domestic quarrels and unites under the common flag of the two great races that shall emerge some day out of the great chaos as the great Indian nation.

But is Bengal really dead ? And if she is dead, how can she have her resurrection ? Not surely by terrorism



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and anarchy nor even by socialism and communism which have been threatening the Eastern and the Western world ever since the fall of Germany after the last Great War. Capitalism must live in the world whatever may be the claims of socialism and communism. In my personal opinion, whatever may be the issues of the present World War, it is absolutely certain that democracy shall ultimately survive—but not the kind of democracy which the ultra-socialist or communist contemplates nor even the democracy which is the honest dream of the capitalist or the bureaucrat. If I am permitted to risk a forecast of the new world order, I must frankly confess that the Eastern world will be thrown into a horrid confusion even after the readjustment of Europe, and it is very likely that Britain's noble dream of a great commonwealth of free nations will materialise in the long run, and America's honest aspiration to benefit the world with her science, industries, wealth, and culture will fulfil itself.

But in the meanwhile, India must live and Bengal must be saved. The very fact that all the provinces of our country are now passing the most anxious time on account of the food situation in Bengal and also that the Government is taxing all its brains and resources to relieve the great distress, shows clearly how important is the place of Bengal in the economy of the British Empire. Bengal like the Kohinoor of Taj Mahal is the most precious jewel in the diadem of the Indian.

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nation. India knows that Bengal is the brain power, the fountainhead of light and culture, the home of patriots, the cradle of immortal souls, the bower of Nature's bounties, and also the precious minion of her great rulers ; and that is why, she can never die even while she is in the mortal grip of her deadly enemies—flood, famine, disease, destitution, death and ruin. If the plants and the flowers, which were considered as inanimate and insensate things, could be revived to the height and glory of human life and human consciousness by the noble scientist Dr. Jagdish Chandra Bose, if the Western and the Eastern world could declare unanimously that Rabindra Nath Tagore was the greatest of all living poets, if Raja Ram Mohan Roy and Keshab Chandra Sen could unite the East and the West with such a harmony which, Rudyard Kipling said, would never meet till the doom's day, if Deshabandhu Das could inspire the most conflicting elements of our country with a spirit of unity and brotherhood, if Sir Ashutosh Mukerjee could hold the torch of light and culture and illumine the darkest nooks and corners of our benighted land, and if the millions of our brothers and sisters could suffer so patiently and bitterly for years in the hands of man and Nature, and if above all, they can still worship their *Gita* and sing the immortal song of *Bande Mataram*, how can the world believe that Bengal shall ever die whatever may be the storms blowing over her head ? India shall not let her die. The British Government shall positively save her.

## CHAPTER VI

### What Britain has made of Bengal

**B**EFORE the British rule there was no existence of Calcutta. Calcutta was known as Kalighat, and it was neither a port nor a city nor even anything of a town. It was as good as a village. During the Mohammedan rule it was not Calcutta but Dacca which occupied a position of considerable importance, because it was in those days the capital city of Bengal. But during the British rule, Dacca sank into the background, while Calcutta rapidly shot up into prominence. When Bengal was taken and occupied by the British, Calcutta became, not only the headquarters of the civil and military administration, but also the centre of trade and industries. As everybody knows, in the beginning the Britishers came to India as traders but afterwards they settled down as administrators. So, with the spread of British supremacy in India by slow and gradual degrees, Calcutta became the centre of gravitation in every possible way, and that is why, it expanded fast from a tiny village into a huge city, and in the space of the last fifty years it has grown so big and important that

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any foreigner, who happens to visit it, unconsciously compares it with any of the biggest cities in the world such as London, New York, Berlin, Paris. Of course, Bombay has got its historical as well as commercial importance, but then, Bombay sinks into the background when compared with Calcutta either in light and culture or in architecture, or in trade and industries or even in population. Besides, Calcutta has got a much greater importance for its strategic position in the Far East.

When we think of Calcutta, we must think simultaneously of the great achievements Bengal has made in the space of two centuries. There is not a field in which she has not excelled other provinces of India, and the credit of course must go to the builders of the great city of Calcutta, which is rightly called the heart of Bengal, nay the heart of India, though Bombay, on the other hand, claims to be the gateway of our country. It is neither the Bengalees nor any other race of India that have built this city though it has surely been built upon the brain and genius, the blood and ~~energy~~ of the Bengali race. But the Bengalees ~~are not now,~~ they were two hundred years ago.

whole province visiting particular and some of the important villages not merely symptoms of a new life of a new world. There were no

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magnificent buildings, no educational institutions, no court houses, no hospitals or nursing homes, not even many shops, and probably not a single hotel or restaurant in any of the big towns which have sprung up under the British rule. In the days of the Hindu or Mohammedan rule there were no railways, no steamships, no tramcars, no automobiles, nothing of the kind. People had to travel on foot if they travelled at all, and in covering a distance of only hundred miles they took sometimes months and weeks and ran the risk in the bargain to lose their lives either in the hands of wild beasts or in those of the wilder human beings whose only habitation was in the forests and jungles and whose only occupation was to rob and kill the poor wayfarers.

But now look at the mighty change. You can cover hundreds of miles in a few hours by the railroads or by the big navigable rivers on steam-engines or steamships and without the least risk of life. Life has become hundred times more comfortable and thousand times easier than before. You can send your message to the remotest corners of your province or country or of the world by post or telegraph or cable or by the air and the radio. Even in my own younger days or earlier still, in the days of my parents, there were very few school or college buildings. The old vernacular schools used

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to be held in the open air under the trees or in ruined thatched cottages or at most under corrugated iron sheds. But now, you can find even in the villages fine buildings for the primary schools, and magnificent palaces for the colleges in towns and cities. In the days of the Hindu rulers or the Mughal emperors there might have been a few Hakims or Vaidis in some of the cities or villages, but then, the science of surgery was completely unknown to them, and also the treatment of fatal diseases such as cholera, smallpox, typhoid, malaria, appendicitis, gallstone, cancer, plague and the whole lot of foul maladies was the despair of the Hakimi or the Ayurvedic system. Besides, there were no hospitals or nursing homes, no orphanages or asylums in which the diseased and the crippled, the homeless and the destitute could be properly treated or sheltered. It is no good believing that our forefathers were free from the diseases or that they did not suffer grievously and die at the end. It may be of course partly true that due to our artificial conditions of modern life or due to the various articles of adulterated food, our health has suffered a considerable deterioration, but then, we must acknowledge that we can secure relief and comfort these days from the medical science far more easily than we could ever do in the days of our ancient forefathers. But who has brought this comfort or relief to our very door? Not we the Indians.

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What Mahatma Gandhi regards as *Ram-Rajya* was the rule of ignorance and superstition. In those days Sanskrit was the only language our forefathers used to study, and this study too was confined only to the holy scriptures and monopolised by the Brahmins. The Kshatriyas,<sup>1</sup> the Vaishyas, and the Sudras had no right to study the scriptures, and as such, they were mechanically deprived of the fruit of knowledge, which of course was nothing but a rudimentary form of philosophy or at most a codification of the religious rites and ceremonies based mainly on most stupid ignorance and darkest superstition. Can any rational human being think of a particular day of the month or a particular hour of the day as auspicious or inauspicious, or can any man of common sense ever conceive that a particular fruit or vegetable can become poisonous or wholesome in the lunar or solar eclipse? Hindu philosophy means nothing but a codification of the rules of health and conduct, of the laws of morality and religion, of the regulations governing birth, marriage, and death, and even the minutest incidents of our every day life. And it was the Brahmins who were the law-givers, the law-makers, as well as the law-breakers. They might have studied or memorised all the *Vedas* and the *Upanishads* and the *Gita*, but then, with all their scholarship in Sanskrit literature, in the holy scriptures, in the six

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systems of Hindu philosophy, they had no knowledge of history or geography, mathematics or science, economics or politics, medicine or surgery. In fact, they were literally cut off from the moving world and studiously shut out from all things under the sun or the moon except of course those which were visible or available within the four walls of their house or village.

Fifty years ago or earlier, English education or any kind of education other than pure superstition used to be regarded as profanation, firstly because the mysteries of our ancient philosophy and literature would thereby be exposed, and secondly because the Brahmins would lose their monopoly of knowledge and learning and also their privileges of exercising tyranny and undue authority over the stupid masses, which were in those days probably much worse than the herds of dumb driven cattle. Even now in the villages and amongst the orthodox Indians, going abroad or crossing the seas is regarded as a positive sin, and whenever there is any occasion for an ambitious youth to sail for England or America, the Brahmin priest of his village puts up a loud protest on the authority of the scriptures, and the women folk of his family begin to rend the sky with lamentations as if somebody is leaving for the other world, and last of all, when the youth returns home after some time from the foreign land, he is not admitted



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into the family or the home unless he performs an elaborate ceremony of expiation such as fasting for some days or feeding the beggars or visiting some holy place and offering prayers and ablutions to the waters of the Ganges or at the feet of some sacred idol in a holy temple.

In Bengal in my younger days when my own sisters used to be educated in schools or colleges, people used to whisper at the back or declare openly in the face that we were a family of sinners and deserved excommunication in this world and an eternal damnation in the other world. Poor souls, the women of Bengal as of India even now in the villages and in most of the backward district towns are locked up behind the *purdah* and made to drudge as kitchen maids or nurses or as galley slaves whether they are spinsters or wives or widows. It is only in some of the big cities we find our women being educated in the colleges or coming out in the open streets or taking part in any outdoor life for work or recreation, and even these women are being badly criticised and sadly misunderstood by their friends and relatives simply because they have broken through the *purdah* and have claimed some of the common rights and privileges which men have been denying to them for centuries out of sheer jealousy and malice.

It was Raja Ram Mohan Roy who was the first to

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initiate the women of Bengal to the blessings of English education and culture. He established a new brotherhood known as the Brahmo Samaj which undertook to reinterpret the Hindu religion and reform the Hindu society in the light of western thought and culture. The followers of Raja Ram Mohan Roy as well as of Keshab Chandra Sen, fought vigorously against the ignorance and superstition of their countrymen by preaching a more rational theory of God, the human soul, the world, and other problems of philosophy, and also by implanting in their own lives the ideals of high thought, noble freedom, and great deeds. They flung away the caste convention, shattered the creed of idolatry, and insisted on equality between man and woman. I remember the days in Bengal when we had to face a great inconvenience, a good deal of insult and injury, and quite a strong opposition at every step as we gave up idol worshipping or marrying our daughters at the age of six or eight or keeping them under lock and key or depriving them of the blessings of education, or putting the widows for ever in a state of monastic life and stern discipline. I remember distinctly how most of the families, that followed the creed of Raja Ram Mohan Roy and Keshab Chandra Sen in theory as well as in practice, were boycotted by the Hindus and treated literally like the untouchables. The Brahmos of those days could not get easily the

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services of the barber or the washerman, the cook or the common servant. Sometimes, they were refused the occupation of a house, and sometimes they were prohibited to draw water from the same well or tank which was used by the other Hindus. The last and clinching blow was dealt upon them by refusing to marry their sons and daughters or even by shutting them out from all social functions and religious ceremonies. So, unless and until the followers of the new creed gained in numerical strength, they were really in deep waters, and finally, it was the spread of English education which slowly disabused the minds of the orthodox fanatics and helped to bring about a compromise between the Brahmos and the Hindus.

One cannot imagine the horrid state of social or domestic affairs in Bengal or in any part of India before the British rule or even in the beginning of it at least for a period of hundred years. Bengal was the first province that suffered the axe of the revolution which transported her atonce from a state of stagnation and death into a whirlpool of life and light. We always flatter ourselves that before the British set their foot on our native soil, we were better fed, better clad, better educated, and better trained in the rules of health, conduct, and domestic economy, and even that we were brought up in the midst of brotherhood and fellow-

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feeling which we have completely lost ever since we have come under the influence of English education, English culture, and English ways of life. But when we look back into the history of our domestic and public life two hundred years ago or even fifty years ago, we are shocked to find how our men were lazy, illiterate, debauched and drunken, crooked and malicious, and depraved in every way like the brutes in the wilderness.

If we study our marriage laws, laws of succession and ownership of property, religious rites and ceremonies, and even our moral codes, we find in them nothing but traces of barbarism, indiscipline, superstition and anarchy of every description. Look at the condition of the women in our country. Even these days, they have no right to choose their partners in life, they are not entitled to succeed their parents in owning landed estates or other kinds of property, they are kept behind the *purdah* to drudge as kitchen maids or nurses before and after their marriage, they are forbidden by law and tradition to remarry even when they lose their husbands at an early age, and last of all, they are cruelly deprived of all the benefits of education and are strictly guarded against all kinds of air life or outdoor activities or of the Hindu widows we miserable existence in the wh

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race. The widows of our country are treated literally as slaves and outcastes to suffer not merely the privation of food and clothing but also the negation of all kinds of domestic or social festivities. The Hindu widow, the moment she happens to lose her husband, is denuded of all her ornaments and fine apparels. She is made to wear a plain piece of white linen which is bleached of all colours in the body or at the ends. Her arms and ears, neck and ankles, head and fingers—all are deprived of their decorations—natural or artificial. She cannot wear iron bangles or copper rings or even conch bracelets. She is not allowed even to put flowers on her hair or wear garlands on her neck. She can not colour her lips with the betel leaf juice, which is the most enviable natural lipstick of the Indian women.

The Hindu widow is assigned a special room and a separate kitchen as if she is an outcaste or an untouchable. As a matter of fact, she is not allowed to cook or touch the food of other members in the family. She has to eat nothing but pure vegetables and boiled rice, without any spices, and that also only once a day. She is not permitted to have for her dinner except some liquid food, either milk or water. She is strictly forbidden to smell eggs or fish or meat or any delicious food which the Hindu widower reserves for himself and.

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for his second or third or fourth wife. She is also made to fast very frequently every month in the name of religion or rather in order to expiate her sins of widowhood. I must mention here that the Hindus sincerely believe that women become widows simply because they are sinners while men become widowers because they are virtuous souls, and that is why, the widows of our country are not allowed to marry all their life in order to expiate their sins while the widowers are privileged to marry any number of times even when they have grown extremely old and crippled. In our country specially amongst the Hindus, the grandfathers of eighty breed as fast as the grand-daughters of eight. But unfortunately, the grand-daughters cannot marry more than once in their life while the grandfathers can enjoy the luxury of a big harem which consists not only of lawful partners but also of concubines.

The Hindu widow is not allowed to take part in any kind of religious ceremonies or social festivities on the plea that her very presence is a profanation to the holy function or the joyous recreation. She is kept behind the *purdah* more guardedly than the Muslim women, and if she ever happens to have any communication with any man familiar or unfamiliar, as it is but natural for every young and budding soul to be tempted by male companionship, she is at once turned out of home to be stranded in the open street, and naturally,

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she has no other alternative in life except to take to prostitution or beggary.

But British rule in India and English education of the people of our country have considerably mitigated the sufferings of our women by bringing them out of the *pardah*, by abolishing many of the pernicious conventions of society, by allowing Indian women certain privileges which they had never enjoyed either during the Hindu or Mohammedan rule. It is a fact that due to English education and culture the minds of men in our country have been sufficiently broadened and the status of women has considerably improved. We cannot deny, however much we may talk of the evils of English education, that our women have learnt or are learning slowly and gradually how to bring up their children and manage their domestic affairs more efficiently, how to help their partners in life with guidance and advice and even with monetary assistance, and how to build up and strengthen their national life in the face of a thousand odds which their sisters in other countries have not got to face.

Not more than one hundred years ago in India, the Hindu married women used to be burnt alive along with their deceased husbands in the funeral pyre on the foolish superstition that widows bring sins and calamities to the family of their husbands if they survive them. There would have been some method in this kind of barbarous speculation if the husbands also were similarly burnt alive in the funeral pyre of their deceased wives.

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But unfortunately in India the Hindu laws of religion and morality operate invariably in favour of the male species and grievously against the female counterpart. Men in India are privileged not only to marry as many times as they like either during the life-time of their wives or after their death but also to exercise all sorts of tyranny over women on the plea of religion or social custom. Our forefathers, whether in Bengal or in any other part of India, were privileged to keep and discard their partners in life on the slightest pretext such as infidelity, sterility, physical malady, and so many other real or imaginary disqualifications, and even now, as a matter of fact, we the Hindus as well as the Mohammedans throw out our wives into the open street and enter into a legal partnership with other women as indifferently as we lace or unlace our shoes. Of course, the Mohammedan women unlike the Hindu women have got the right to remarry when they are discarded by their husbands, and they have also the privilege of inheriting property from their parents or other legal guardians. But consider the position of the Hindu wives when they are discarded by their husbands. They can have no shelter in the world except the brothel and no means of livelihood except the charity of others.

Of course, British rule has not improved much the status of women in India though English education has



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considerably relieved their economic distress. Formerly, helpless women in our country could not think of any independent profession except domestic drudgery or public prostitution. But now-a-days, so many occupations are open to them, though their guardians are still reluctant to allow them to do any other job except teaching or nursing. In my personal opinion, unless and until women are allowed to follow the same kind of education and also to earn their livelihood by the same form of occupation as men have been doing from the beginning of the human race, there is absolutely no hope of building up a free and powerful nation. Look at the Americans and all the western nations—how powerful and progressive they are ! It is all because they have given equal facilities and privileges to their men and women irrespective of any question of sex or colour or rank. We often accuse the British Government that we are still a slave nation. But my point of contention is whether or not we are sufficiently civilised to have Self-government. Even in these days of light and culture we have so much prejudice against education and learning in the villages as well as in the cities amongst the orthodox Hindus and the Mohammedans. Besides, whenever there is a proposal from the Government for any kind of reform, we at once put up a strong opposition betraying thereby our instinct of barbarism. I had been lately thinking of the problem of our

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vernaculars as the medium of instruction or as the *lingua franca* of our country. Certain provinces and universities in India have fanatically introduced their own vernaculars as the medium of instruction in their schools and colleges without calculating the disastrous consequences. They have been misguided by their anti-English feelings or rather by their false nationalistic sentiment to think that the races and the communities can be united by following a common vernacular language for the whole country or a particular medium of instruction for a particular province. In the matter of education if any of the Indian vernaculars is adopted as the medium of instruction, the people of every province will be crippled and cut off slowly from every other province for the simple reason that there are so many languages spoken by so many different races. The disastrous consequences shall be felt more in vocational education than in other departments of culture unless and until every province can be sufficiently industrialised to make it economically free from other provinces of India. The question of a *lingua franca* or of any particular vernacular as the medium of instruction should arise only when all the provinces have been sufficiently industrialised and the whole country has been made politically free.

If we talk of trade and industries, India is yet far backward than any free country in the world, not

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because she is poorer in material resources, but because she is not yet politically free, and also because she is steeped in the darkness of ignorance and superstition. Even now the landlords and the *zamindars* believe in hoarding money in the bank or laying waste of their landed resources by neglecting the peasantry. The big capitalists are yet awfully shy of investment of their capital in fruitful speculations. Whatever strides of progress India has made so far during the last fifty years are all due to the incentive which she has received from the British capitalists who have invested much of their wealth and commercial brains in the raw materials of our country. Even now we can count on the tip of our fingers the microscopic number of mills and factories, workshops and technical institutions, farms and dairies, or any kind of industrial and commercial concerns, which can compare favourably with similar organisations and developments in America or Europe.

It is only very recently that Indians have been taking some amount of interest in vocational education or in the industrial developments of the country. But even now most of the Indians believe more in clerical or administrative or teaching jobs than in any kind of independent business by which they can probably earn a far better living and also enrich and strengthen their country economically to a far greater extent. The report of the Indian National Planning Committee shows how

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the political leaders of our country propose to divert the energy and brain of the people to the cultivation of vocational education and development of industries. But, unless and until the masses are educated sufficiently and also the capitalists are made to invest their money, there is little chance of commercialising or industrialising our country. Whatever the English people have done for us so far in this direction is not considerable and yet it is not altogether negligible.

The political consciousness which has been sweeping over our country from time to time for the last fifty years and the spirit of revolt against bureaucracy, imperialism, and exploitation, which characterises the present era not only in India but in every maladjusted country, is the direct effect of the political ideologies of the European countries, particularly England and Russia. The communism and democracy which every Indian contemplates to establish in his motherland is borrowed from the Russians and the English people. Nobody can deny that the British Parliament is the most efficient political constitution in the world just as the United States of America or the United States of Soviet Russia are probably the most democratic units of human freedom and harmony. In my personal opinion, if India also could form a similar political constitution, she would have been probably as happy and strong as England, Russia or America.

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But whatever political ideology or consciousness we have developed so far in the space of a couple of centuries is the golden fruit of the British rule in India, though many of my countrymen would deny the fact and most of our rulers would regret it. All the political leaders of our country without any exception have imbibed the democratic spirit from the English people, from English education, and English culture, though they are ungrateful enough to deny it and also to accuse the benefactors of exploitation and misguidance. Of course, it is also a fact that the English people have no less been benefitted economically and materially by the unlimited resources of our country, which have made them so powerful and rich in commercial and industrial enterprises as well as in the military campaigns. If India were not in the hands of the British, nobody could tell how she would have fared in the last Great War or how she would win the victory in the present contest against the Axis Powers. Of course, the English people are a grateful race, which the Indians are not in spite of their noble philosophy and sublime religion.

What is true of India is also true of Bengal. Bengal may be intellectually more advanced, she may be more patriotic and self-sacrificing, she may have a more glorious history than most of the other provinces of

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India, yet she is commercially as backward, industrially as poor, and politically as disunited as other parts of our country. That is why, it is but natural that she should suffer grievously whenever there is any economic distress, any political crisis or any artificial or natural calamity. The present food situation in Bengal is an artificial as well as a natural calamity and is chiefly due to the lack of proper co-operation between the people and the local Government, which again is the result of sad misunderstanding and bad handling. Of course, the Government has fortunately been able to tackle the situation to a great extent, otherwise the suicidal policy of some of the leading members of the various parties would have led the whole province to a complete massacre.

## CHAPTER VII

# The Causes of the Food Famine in Bengal

**D**R. Shyama Prasad Mukerjee in his cable to Mr. Sankar Mitra of the Swarajya House, London, describes in his own way the food situation in Bengal, "Summary of White Paper published here is inaccurate and misleading. Bengal demands independent investigation into the causes, which include enforcement of denial policy under orders of the Central Government ; deprivation of boats ; dislocating transport and agriculture ; disorganising rural economy ; lack of co-ordination between civil and military requirements ; thoughtless, unplanned purchases by Government and big industrialists irrespective of local needs and market rates ; the present Ministry's wilful propaganda since April emphasising that there was no shortage ; an undue stress on private hoarding and encouraging simultaneously reckless purchases by favoured stockists and other agents ; appointment of Ispahanis as the sole agents for purchasing rice ; receiving over five crore rupees with-

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out tender and quotation and without limit of rates or safeguard against profiteering ; failure of the Government to announce results of stock-taking and to secure effective price control ; profiteering by the Government on wheat supplied by the Punjab ; distribution most ineffective and unsatisfactory—no attempt at building up local stocks, and the unconstitutional action of ex-Governor Herbert with a selected coterie of permanent officials in installing a League Ministry, leading to acute cleavage between the Government and the people. This policy encourages inefficiency and corruption.

“ The mortality figures are incorrect. At least 50,000 persons are dying every week. The real responsibility rests on the British Government. Press criticising Bengal Government’s bungling has been muzzled. No suitable arrangement yet made for consignment of food grains to the rural areas. Results will be disastrous if the *Aman* crop is purchased by the Government without effective machinery, having a popular support for equitable distribution. The people’s confidence has been completely shaken and cannot be restored unless the Government is really representative and national. No satisfactory arrangement for medical relief or children’s protection.

“ Bengal can yet be saved if representatives of the



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British Government and the people combine, irrespective of other differences, in saving the province from complete ruin. Bureaucracy ruling here is incompetent to face the crisis. Do mobilise public opinion in Great Britain for immediate change of policy."

The *Tribune*, the leading paper of the Punjab, says in its editorial columns of the 21st October, 1943, "The London *Times*, which was evidently in search of a scapegoat in connection with the Bengal famine, has caught hold of poor Mr. Fazlul Huq. According to it he and his old ministerial colleagues should be held responsible for the terrible calamity that has overtaken Bengal. From the Tory point of view no better contention could be put forward. The nationalist Muslim party thus gets a bad name and the pet children of British Imperialism, Messrs. Nazim-ud-Din and Co., who are in power now, escape the condemnation which they amply deserve. When Mr. Fazlul Huq and his nationalist friends held the reins of administration, they did everything in their power to avert the impending catastrophe. They had neither the unstinted support of the Governor nor the spontaneous co-operation of the permanent officials; still they struggled tenaciously to maintain the happiness of their province. But they were thrown out of their office by a hostile bureaucracy, and in their place Muslim Leaguers were installed in complete violation of the spirit of the constitution. For

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the famine in Bengal the British Government, the Government of India, and the Nazim-ud-Din Ministry are all responsible. If the British Government and the Government of India cannot be blamed by the *Times*, let the Nazim-ud-Din Ministry be exclusively saddled with the responsibility for the food crisis in Bengal. Why drag poor Mr. Fazlul Huq and his old ministerial colleagues out of the obscurity of non-official life into which they have been thrust by a scheming bureaucracy and put them in the official picture in which they should not be put? Supposing Sir Nazim-ud-Din and his colleagues are not responsible for the acute shortage of food in Bengal, is it not a matter of shame for them that it continues and thousands of people continue perishing every week, while the management of affairs in Bengal is in their hands? They must either set the situation right or get out of office. We do not know how far Mr. Fazlul Haq's statement that corruption is rampant in some official circles and it hinders the relief work is correct. But there is absolutely no doubt that the relief work is not progressing satisfactorily. Bengal's Civil Supplies Minister, Mr. Suhrawardy, has just declared that rice has not disappeared and its price has gone down in Bengal. If the situation were as Mr. Suhrawardy has represented it to be, the daily death roll would have considerably diminished. The Nazim-ud-Din Ministry appears to be far removed from the realities of life in Bengal. It is in the interest of the province that it should make room for a Ministry that would courage-

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ously face facts—however terrifying they might be—and would not hesitate to quarrel with the Government of India and the British Government, if need be, and adopt the boldest measures with the object of rescuing Bengal from the jaws of death.”

Mr. Kalinath Roy, an eminent journalist of Calcutta, says in his article under the title—*Misleading British Opinion* :—

“ No Secretary of State for India in recent years has, by his public utterances, both within and outside Parliament, so persistently misled British opinion with regard to Indian problems as Mr. Amery. It is for this reason, no less than for his consistently reactionary attitude towards India's national demand for constitutional independence, that all sections of Indian opinion, including the most moderate, led by so responsible a public man as Sir Tej Bahadur Sapru, have long been united in the demand for his removal from the India Office. The latest instances in point are Mr. Amery's speech at Birmingham on October 13 and the interview he gave to the political correspondent of the *Sunday Times* two days later. In the first he thus summed up the causes of the Indian famine :—

‘ In ten years between 1931 and 1941 the population of India has increased by 50 millions, more than the whole population of the British Isles. Every month there are some 400,000 more mouths to be fed. The vast majority of this new population, possibly 40 millions, have had to find their living off the same land which barely sustained a smaller population in the past.

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Even with every effort to develop industry, to exploit irrigation and to improve agricultural methods, the menace of famine has never been wholly removed. That has been the normal background. To it have been added two new factors: the war and the breaking up of the former unity of the Indian administration by the extension of self-government.'

" Could any statement have been more thoroughly misleading than this? India is not the only country where the population increased substantially in the ten years from 1931 to 1941. Were all those countries in which there was a substantial increase in the population during the period confronted with the same menace of famine as India? And is it primarily and principally India's fault that unlike most of those countries the vast majority of the new population in India have had to find their living off the same land which barely sustained a smaller population in the past? Is Mr. Amery so wholly ignorant of the economic history of India under British rule as not to know that for very many years, despite strong, energetic and earnest protests and remonstrances on the part of Indian, and in some cases, British politicians and economists, the policy that was officially followed in this country was that of reducing it to the position of a purely agricultural country—a producer of raw materials and a consumer of goods made from those very materials by British manufacturers? Is he unaware that public men and political and commercial organisations in India have repeatedly dwelt upon the disastrous results of India's exclusive

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dependence on land, that it is only in recent years that this policy has partially changed, that in the opinion of most competent observers the change is still far from adequate, and that even under the stress of the War, which has demonstrated the utter futility, amounting almost to impossibility of India's having her supplies of even the most necessary manufactured goods from abroad, the Government have not fully realised the necessity of building up Indian industries, with a view to making India economically self-sufficient ? To talk of every effort to develop industry, in these circumstances, is indeed to indulge in a self-evident absurdity.

“ That the War has had much, very much, to do with the present situation is unhappily undeniable, though even here it must be said frankly that a considerable part of the trouble is due not to the War as such, but to the manner in which it has been exploited by selfish and unscrupulous people. In any case, we have it on Mr. Amery's authority that the trouble was foreseen. If so, how can the British Government and the Government of India evade their responsibility for the situation that has arisen ? Is it not indeed a highly significant fact that so reactionary a British journal as the *Daily Mail* has, after a careful examination of the facts of the case placed before the British public by the Secretary of State himself, been forced to admit that the British Government, the Government of India, and the Bengal Government share the responsibility for the present situation in Bengal and must share the blame. As regards the first Mr. Amery has candidly admitted

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that ' the British Parliament and the British Government have still the ultimate constitutional responsibility for the safety and welfare of India, and that quite apart from any direct constitutional responsibility, every partner in the British Commonwealth has a moral responsibility towards every other.' If this responsibility is admitted with regard to the future, how can it be disavowed with regard to the past ? The Government of India's responsibility for the past is, if anything, even more direct. Not only are they expected to have a better and fuller knowledge of the actual conditions in India than the British Government, but the Act of 1935 has expressly given them effective powers of interference with Provincial Governments in an emergency like the present. 'The existence of these powers was acknowledged by Sir Jwala Prasad Srivastava, Food Member of the Government of India, in his opening address at the Food Conference in New Delhi on October 13. " Nothing," he said, " can be more clear than that public opinion in India and in the world at large looks to the Government of India to lead and direct your united efforts within the common plan. I conceive it to be my inescapable duty as Food Member of the Government of India to accept that challenge and the trust that it implies. I shall discharge it by every means at my command." Why did not the Government of India then take timely measures to prevent the present situation from arising ?

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Mr. Amery's only answer to the question was that what stood in the way was "the break-up of the former unity of the Indian administration by the extension of self-government." Obviously, if this had been a good enough reason, it would have applied to the future as much as to the past, and yet both Mr. Amery and Sir Jwala Prasad have told us that it will not guide the policy of the Government of India in the future. As a matter of fact, the Government of India's duties and responsibilities in this matter are statutory, and given to them by the very Act to which the provinces owe their so-called autonomy. But this is not our only complaint with regard to Mr. Amery's statement. Quite unaccountably he did not mention in his speech the indisputable fact that over the greater part of India the so-called provincial autonomy is no longer operative, and the administration is in the hands of officials, wholly and solely responsible to the Governor-General and the Secretary of State and through them to the British Parliament. The only large province in India, with the exception of Bengal itself, in which provincial autonomy exists is the Punjab, and it is undeniable that the Punjab did not require much persuasion, to say nothing of coercion, to do her duty by Bengal and other afflicted parts of India. In what way then has the so-called break-up of the former unity of the Indian administration stood in the way of the proper remedies

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being applied to the present distressing malady ? On the other hand, has Mr. Amery never seen the statement made by Mr. Fazlul Huq and other ex-ministers in Bengal to the effect that they were prevented from doing what they considered to be their duty to their people by the independent action taken over their heads, without consultation with and indeed without any reference to them, by the then Governor depending solely on the advice he received from permanent officials ? If these statements are correct, and I am not aware that they have ever been contradicted by those concerned, does not the responsibility, whether legal or moral, of the Government of India and the British Government become all the more indisputable ? ”

Commenting upon the food debate in the Central Legislative Assembly, the *Tribune* in its editorial columns of the 20th November, 1943 says :

“ It is a pity that on the last day of the food debate in the Central Legislative Assembly the Supply Member should have indulged in a vicious and uncalled-for attack on the Congress. He said that if there was predetermined famine in this country, he knew of one group of persons who pre-conceived, pre-determined, and planned to bring about this condition by asking the agriculturists not to sell grains and not to accept currency notes. Apart from the fact that while one set



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of people who gave such advice is lodged within prison bar, another set is safely entrenched in high offices and basking in the bureaucratic sunshine, we should consider it an act of melancholy meanness on the part of any member of the present Government of India to throw the blame for the calamity, which has overtaken Bengal, on the Congress. It was the Government of India which locked all Congress leaders in prison in August 1942 because of the Bombay resolution of the All-India Congress Committee. To have charged them with responsibility for the disturbances which broke out after their arrest and detention was bad enough. To throw on them the blame for a famine, which occurred in Bengal more than twelve months after their arrest and detention in places cut off from all contact with the outside world, is infinitely worse. The woulf in Aesop had better justification in swallowing the lamb.

“ We would put it to the Supply Member that even if—assuming for the sake of argument—the Congress had pre-conceived, pre-determined and planned that this famine should occur, it was the duty of the Government as the lawfully, (or is it unlawfully ?) constituted Government of this country to do everything possible to prevent such a calamity, and for failing to discharge that duty, they deserve to be arraigned before the bar of humanity. The Supply Member has been a member

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of the Government of India now for some years, and consequently, he cannot escape responsibility for the policy or policies which have brought on this country this dire disaster. The charge brought by him against the Congress can have only one meaning,—that the famine has its origin in the reluctance of the peasant to part with grains and accept currency notes on the advice of the Congress. Apart from whatever advice the Congress may or may not have given, whose, pray, is the responsibility for creating the conditions in which the peasant is reluctant to part with his food grains in exchange for currency notes? Was it the Congress that raised the amount of currency notes in circulation from Rs. 172 crores before the War to the colossal figure of nearly Rs. 800 crores in the first week of this month? Was it the Congress which was responsible for the increase in the index number of food grains at Calcutta from 185 in October 1942 to 530 in September 1943? Why did silver rupees and small coins disappear from circulation? Was it on Congress advice? The Food Grains Policy Committee, presided over by the Economic Adviser to the Government of India, was not a subversive body, but why did it recommend that the peasant should be paid in gold instead of currency notes to induce him to part with his stocks? It was the policy of unmitigated inflation in which the Government of India, including the Supply Member, embarked which raised prices to

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sky-high levels, reduced the commodity value of currency notes, brought about food scarcity, famine, and death. Those who took the credit the other day for crushing the Congress rebellion cannot to-day make of the self-same Congress the scape-goat for their incompetence, inefficiency, and worse.

“ On the question of inflation, the Supply Member was, if anything more jejune, less vicious. He pointed out that though in the United Kingdom a thousand million sterling currency notes had been issued without backing, all that money had been immobilised by strict rationing and price control. Then, why did the Government of India, once they embarked on their wild career of inflation, not do what the Government of the United Kingdom had done ? Why did they not, as soon as the first symptoms of inflation began to manifest themselves, introduce price control, rationing, increased taxation, borrowing, and all those orthodox methods of checking inflation which had proved effective in other countries ? And why did they not stop this process of inflation and explore alternative methods of financing the war purchases of the Allied Governments ? If they did not do so, and to-day the country faces starvation and death, was it the Congress which prevented them from doing so ? The Supply Member admits that in India there can be no rationing in rural areas, and if rural areas are left out, how, pray, is inflation to be fought by

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rationing ? The Bengal famine has demonstrated what has been long obvious to the whole country, that those who do not possess the confidence of the people are incapable of discharging their responsibilities to the people. Let them get out and make room for others who will have the willing co-operation of the people in whatever sacrifice they may call upon them to make."

In the course of the debate in the House of Commons on the famine situation in India, Mr. Amery says, "In the case of India we undoubtedly have a constitutional responsibility of which we have not divested ourselves even if in a large measure we have transferred legal powers and actual working machinery of Government to Indian hands. In any case, we are concerned with the suffering of men, women, and fellow-citizens of the Empire whom it is our duty to help and succour to the best of our ability in time of danger and distress. I hope, the House will bear with me if I go with some detail into the economic background and past history of the present situation.

" This Bengal famine is something more than an isolated incident. It is a danger signal, warning us of long-range measures which are needed as well as immediate relief. The vast majority of the population of India have always been and still are subsistence cultivators. In the last twelve years the population of India has gone

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up by some sixty millions. Every month there are over 300,000 additional mouths to be fed in British India alone. Members will have read in the White Paper a review of the situation by Sir Azizul Huq, who till the other day was Food Member of the Viceroy's Council. He pointed out that the annual production of rice per head in Bengal had gone down over the last thirty years from 384 pounds to 283 pounds as a result of the increase of the population in that one province alone of over one million a year in the last decade.

“In India the gravest problem in future will be to find ways and means by improved agricultural methods, by industrialisation, and by education, somehow or other, to outstrip the pressure of the population which leaves so little a margin of surplus, whether for individual standard of life or for financing social reform.

“I would now ask the House to consider what impact the War has meant on so precariously balanced an economic structure. India has played an immensely important part in this war. She has raised nearly two million men for her army, all volunteers. Over and above that she has furnished an enormous quantity of military supplies and industrial raw material of all kinds to this country. It is perfectly true that we have undertaken the ultimate cost of that part of her effort which is not

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concerned with the immediate actual defence of India. That does not, however, affect the immediate war situation, during which vast sums have been spent in India, with no sufficient outlet in the shape of the consumers' goods, whether imported or home-produced, to absorb them. It was really inevitable that under these conditions prices should tend to rise. The Government of India has made great efforts within the compass of what was possible in the very difficult conditions of India to cope with this. But no degree of taxation upon a very limited tax-paying class could get away from the position that a vast sum had been spent in India on agriculturists and others, and there were no consumer goods to absorb the sums. For the first two years the tendency to inflation was kept in check. It was only late in the summer of 1941 that, affected by diverse war news, the price of agricultural products began to rise really seriously.

“ I entirely agree with what Mr. Pethick Lawrence has said about that. If there had been money, the problem would not be nearly as serious as it is to-day. At the same time, merchants, small and large, in villages, towns, and cities, followed suit. The effect of all these factors, each operating on a relatively small scale upon supplies and prices in great urban and industrial centres, was, of course, wholly disproportionate. It was with this increasingly anxious situation that the Government

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of India was called upon to deal. The problem has throughout been one of high prices and local shortage, both essentially due to mal-distribution rather than of an absolute over-all total shortage for the whole of India.

“The figures given in the White Paper show that the total supply of principal food grains for consumption in India during this past crop year have been nearly two million tons above the average of the two preceding years. Mr. Pethick Lawrence referred to exports. It is true that there had been small export during the last crop year, much smaller than the two previous years, and actually the next export figure given in the White Paper is not wholly correct, because it does not include the pretty substantial imports of food grains on Government account during that period. Such export, as there was, has been for regions no less distressed or in danger of distress than India itself, namely Ceylon, where conditions are very similar to India, and which suffered the loss of Burma rice crop and coastal regions of the Persian Gulf. To the difficulties in the way of geographical distribution we have also had to induce a rice eating population to accustom themselves to a change of diet.

“We must bear in mind the nature of the constitution which was set up by this House under the Govern-

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ment of India Act of 1935. Agriculture and food are in the provincial field, and for the Government of India to invade the field of provincial responsibility would in normal peacetime have been not only unconstitutional, in the sense that we use the word, but actually illegal. It is perfectly true that under Section 102 of the Act, strengthened at the outbreak of the War by a new Section 126-A, that power to over-ride the provinces, both in the legislative and the executive field, is given to the Centre when India's security is threatened by war. But to invoke those sections in the absence of any administrative machinery or trained staff with which to enforce them, was not an easy matter. It was not want of foresight or courage, but ordinary common sense which led the Government of India to handle the problem from the outset by a conference with the provincial and State Governments primarily responsible for dealing with the food problem, and by persuasion rather than by coercion. In doing so the Central Government naturally came up against the particular interests of different provinces.

"I need not recapitulate the series of conferences to deal with the question of food prices which the Government of India convened from October 1939 onwards. Among other measures within the scope of the Central Government's powers, it initiated and subsidised a grow-more-food campaign early in 1942,



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under which some twelve million additional acres had been brought under food crops. Towards the end of 1942 the situation, especially as regards wheat, looked so threatening, not only as regards prices but as regards actual supplies in many provinces, that Government convened an All-India Food Conference with provincial and State Governments. At this it was decided first of all to drop price control on wheat which had been found to keep wheat supplies off the market. Secondly, all provinces agreed to estimate their supply position and inform the Central Government of their estimated surplus or deficit. They then undertook to procure all surplus supplies and make them available for distribution by the centre to the areas which were in deficit. On this foundation the Government of India's basis plan for feeding deficit areas from surplus producing areas was drawn up.

“ I was in constant touch with the Government of India over the situation, and while the Government of India had its anxieties, the measures it had taken were in their hope—and I may add, the hope was justified in a greater part of India—sufficient to meet the needs of the situation. What I was going to say was that these arrangements, helped as they were by the substantial emergency imports for which the Government of India in good time asked this country, and which this

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country supplied inspite of the shipping difficulties, and also helped a little later by a bumper wheat crop in the Punjab, tided over by these windfalls and arrangements made by the Government of India in the main achieved their immediate purpose. If we are to judge the situation as a whole and in its proper perspective, we must remember that what threatened India a year ago was a widespread, possibly almost universal famine. If members will look at the notes in Section 5 of the White Paper on the position of other areas than Bengal, they will realise the extent to which that menace was averted or brought within narrow limits. For that credit is duly given in the notes to the administrative action taken by the provinces and States concerned."

## CHAPTER VIII

### The Raging Spectre of Famine

**I**T has been admitted by the Government and the people of India who are equally interested in the welfare of Bengal that the spectre of famine has been raging with considerable violence not only at Calcutta but practically in all the district towns and villages of the province. There is no doubt that there has been a considerable shortage of food grains due to various causes—artificial and natural, and also that the purchasing power of the people of Bengal being comparatively much lower than that of other provinces, the lower middle class as well as the poorer classes of the population have suffered grievously due to the unprecedented famine, which however has been fairly controlled by the prompt and judicious measures adopted by the Government and also by the magnanimous attitude of other provinces that have freely contributed money and food-stuff to the relief of the sufferers. It is no good discussing how many persons are dying every week or every day, because it does not very much help the situation. Any-

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body, who knows the conditions of life in Bengal, the occupations of the people, the natural enemies of the province, and also the enormous stress of the War as well as the acute economic problem of our country even in normal times, can well imagine the figure to which the famine toll can rise even without consulting any statistics of mortality.

Dr. Hirday Nath Kunzru after having visited Bengal during the famine days issued a statement in which he says :

“ There is incredible misery everywhere. Starvation is the lot of the people, both in towns and villages, but the rural areas are more seriously affected than the urban areas. The sufferings of the villagers, particularly of women and children, bring tears to one's eyes. Desertion of wives by husbands and of children by their parents is increasing, and smaller cultivators and landless labourers are selling their lands and houses in order to have a few rupees to buy food with. There are shops in Narayangunj where one can see old corrugated tin sheets which cover the cottages of the village people sold by starving villagers under the stress of a compelling necessity. These people thus uprooted from their homes and without any resources migrate to the towns in search of food and flock to the gruel kitchens. This seems to me to disprove effectively the charge of hoarding which has been brought against the cultivator.

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It is cruel to charge starving villagers with deliberately withholding rice from the markets. I have seen rice on sale in village hearths but in very small quantities, and its price was nowhere less than Rs. 50 per maund. It was much higher in towns. If the orders fixing the price of rice, which has proved ineffective, is withdrawn, as it should be, some rice may yet find its way into the local markets. But I have been told not merely by non-officials but also by such officials as have had an opportunity of discussing the matter with me, that there is no reason to suppose that its quantity will be appreciable.

“Destitutes’ homes have been started in several places, for instance, at Dacca, Chandpur, and Narayangunj to which people who would otherwise live and die in the streets are removed, and emergency hospitals have been opened for destitutes suffering from malaria, dysentery, diarrhoea, and other diseases. Yet one comes across dead bodies and emaciated persons wherever one goes. A good proportion of the destitutes in the streets looked like walking corpses. It will be a miracle if they manage to live. The same thing may be said of those who are being looked after in the destitutes’ homes and the emergency hospitals. Mr. Amery has denied in the House of Commons that there is a shortage of medical supplies or a widespread outbreak of disease. Whatever the source of his information, his statement is completely at variance with the facts. There is a great

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shortage of medical supplies. Quinine is almost not available, and the people are falling a prey to all kinds of diseases on account of loss of vitality.

“The gruel kitchens run by non-official agencies or by the authorities with the aid of money collected from the public are helpful, but their number is small. They have to be closed down from time to time for want of foodstuffs, and the *Khichuri* given per head is as a rule about 2 or 2½ *Chattacks* only, notwithstanding the decision of the Government, as announced in a press note dated October 13, that the scale of food grains for preparation of *Khichuri* should be immediately raised, to 6 *Chattacks* for working adults and expectant and nursing mothers, 4 *Chattacks* for other adults, and 2 *Chattacks* for children. The destitutes are fed only once a day. We shall therefore be deceiving ourselves if we think that they offer any real solution of the problem.

“I was told at Dacca where foodstuffs are being unofficially rationed by the Dacca Central Relief Committee under the presidentship of the popular Sessions Judge Mr. De, that only 12 *Chattacks* of rice and 20 *Chattacks* of *Atta* had been distributed per head by the Mohalla Committees in the course of a month, and that there was a shortage everywhere, not merely of rice, but of other foodstuffs also with the possible exception of some pulses. Besides, the price of scarcely any food grain was less than 12 annas per seer at least in any town.

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This is naturally having its effect on all classes of people, but people belonging to the lower middle class owing to their inability to beg are perhaps suffering more terribly than the other classes.

“ Till I came to Bengal, I thought that there might be some justification for the complaint that the Bengal Government was being unfairly attacked by its political opponents who were exaggerating the calamity for their own purposes. But I feel convinced now that the statements made by public men of Bengal represented the bare truth, and that they have rendered a service to their province by bringing the true facts to the notice of the Indian and the British public.

“ I find that the need for cloth is almost as great as for food. At present what is required are ‘ dhotis ’ and ‘ sarees,’ but warm clothing would be soon urgently required, and if it is not forthcoming, it can easily be imagined what effects the inclemencies of the weather will have on the people already exhausted by starvation.

“ Mr. Amery has repeatedly stated in the House of Commons that the deaths from starvation were only about a thousand a week. I have no hesitation in saying that such a statement amounts to an attempt to conceal the true facts from the British public. My experience has convinced me that the mortality due to scarcity of food is immensely greater. I was told in a big sub-division that it had been estimated that in that

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sub-division alone the deaths from starvation amounted to between 750 and 1,000 per week. It is feared that the situation will deteriorate considerably with the approach of winter owing to the want of warm clothing. Even in towns the death rate is very high. Chandpur and Munshigunj reminded me of the horrible conditions prevailing in Contai. I do not want to use strong language, but I think, I would be failing in my duty to Bengal and the country if I did not frankly state the facts as I saw them.

“I was frequently asked why all the food grains, supplied to Bengal by the surplus provinces were being sent to Calcutta and why the waterways were not being used for the despatch of food direct to Eastern Bengal. Members of the relief committees indignantly asked me whether the welfare of Calcutta alone was the concern of the Local Government and their districts had ceased to form part of Bengal. These questions required to be answered by the Government. There may be good reasons for not utilizing waterways to send food direct to Eastern Bengal and starving the districts while feeding greater Calcutta, which the people are unaware of. If so, they should be clearly stated so that the people may understand why they are being made to suffer.

“There is serious anxiety among the people regarding the policy which the Provincial Government will follow in respect of the ‘*Aman*’ crop. They feel, and I think, rightly that it will be disastrous if the entire crop is purchased by the Government. It seems to be



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imperatively necessary that Calcutta and the bigger towns should be rationed as early as possible in accordance with the policy recommended by the last Food Conference, but it will be nothing short of a catastrophe if the Bengal Government or any other Local Government tried in the present state of things to take possession of the entire stock of food within its jurisdiction.

“ That Bengal is suffering from a famine of almost unprecedented magnitude is an indescribably tragic fact, but I do not think, it is entirely due to the failure of the last ‘ *Aman* ’ crop in some districts or the cessation of imports from Burma. Even if the yield of the ‘ *Aman* ’ crop fell short of the quantity required by two million people, as has been stated sometimes the authorities, the distress is out of all proportion to the shortage. I feel, therefore, that the present crisis is to no small extent due to failure or unwillingness of the Bengal Government to recognise the gravity of the situation for a long time and to take comprehensive and resolute measures to deal with the emergency.

“ The Bengal Government has signally failed to discharge its duty towards the people of Bengal. The ultimate responsibility for the present catastrophe is that of the British Government and the Government of India. What were they doing when things were going from bad to worse in Bengal ? Why were they following what Lord Strabolgi has called in the recent debate in the House of Lords a policy of masterly inactivity in so vital

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a matter ? The reasons given by the Under-Secretary of State in justification of their attitude add insult to injury. Apparently Mr. Amery and Lord Linlithgow attached importance to everything but their duty to save millions of human beings from starvation and death.

“ Mr. Amery has made much of the fact that wheat was imported into India in the concluding months of 1942-43. So far as I know, the British Government agreed to the importation of only 250,000 tons of wheat, and has now been publicly stated, the Government of India, receiving about 150,000 tons, came to the conclusion that no more need be imported. The British public has forced the British Government to abandon its previous apathetic attitude, but it remains to be seen whether the Indian authorities are still prepared to use the large powers with which the constitution invests them to rescue helpless and suffering Bengal from the disaster which threatens to engulf it. Let no one think that the present troubles will be over as soon as the ‘ *Aman* ’ crop, which happily promises to be a bumper crop, has been harvested. The upheaval that has taken place in both towns and villages cannot subside in a few days or weeks. The most strenuous efforts will have to be made to rehabilitate those who have lost their all and to restore their old sense of self-respect and self-confidence and their pride in honest and hard work. The responsibility of the Central Government is therefore, much heavier than it was before the war.”

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future of Bengal depends in no small measure on Lord Wavell."

A report of the A. P. I. dated the 6th of November 1943 is quoted below to throw further light on the food situation in Bengal :—

In a statement to the press on relief work in the present food crisis in Bengal, Dr. Shyama Prasad Mukerjee says that non-official bodies and individuals are doing their utmost to give relief, but the problem is of such vast magnitude that they can never fully hope to cope with it. The death-roll is rapidly on the increase and heart-rending accounts are daily being received from far and near. No solution, adds Mr. Mukerjee, is possible unless the efforts of Government and people are properly co-ordinated in accordance with a well-regulated policy of relief and reconstruction whose supreme criterion should be the welfare of the sufferers.

Drawing attention to certain aspects of the problem Dr. Mukerjee says that the policy of sending away destitutes from Calcutta has been marked by forcible removal without proper regard of classification of each family unit. 'Reports are pouring in which indicate that family members are being separated without any possibility of those remaining behind knowing the whereabouts of those who are taken away.' He emphasises that destitutes should be sent to receiving centres as near their homes as possible with the ultimate object

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of sending them to their villages, provision being made at every stage to supply them with food and other requirements.

Dr. Mukerjee also suggests that there must be physical demonstration of stocks of food grains in each area. This will at once create a tremendous psychological change in the minds of the people and inspire them to pool all their resources for saving the people. 'It is regrettable that although according to official figures more than 470,000 tons of food grains have come into Bengal from outside on Government account during the last seven months, stocks have not been built up and distress has been on the increase.'

'The next problem is of pooling all available local resources. Here the Government must change its present policy of thoughtless purchase, which more than anything else has been responsible for the grave crisis. If Government wants to purchase, it must take simultaneous responsibility for distribution.' Dr. Mukerjee wants the Government not to pursue its present policy of purchase so far as the '*Aman*' crop is concerned. Each village must see to it that it retains a sufficient quantity which will last for a year. Only if surplus is available, should it go to feed a neighbouring or distant area. Let the people undertake to do it for themselves as far as possible and prevent official agents from reckless

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seizure of so-called surplus stores. Simultaneously Calcutta and the surrounding industrial areas should be treated as a separate zone altogether. The Government of India should specially undertake to feed this area from stocks despatched to Bengal. Once the greater Calcutta area is taken out and Government and speculative purchasers take off their hands from the rural market for some time at least, the crisis will disappear and normal conditions will be quickly restored. Government, of course, must keep close watch so that movements from one area to another may take place under proper safeguards. Stocks must also be declared by traders and stockists and all attempts for hoarding and profiteering must be put down.

Dr. Mukerjee also dwells on the urgent need for proper medical relief. The condition of the children, he says, is deplorable, and a well-planned scheme is required for their protection by establishing colonies where they will be fed, clothed, and trained until normal conditions return. He concludes, "It would be idle for me to ignore the fundamental fact that the Government machinery has failed at this crisis and will fail unless it is linked up with the efforts of the people themselves. It is not my desire to take up questions of party politics but it is of fundamental importance that if the province is to be saved from disaster there must be a truce in the field of politics and an atmosphere

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created which will make such unified effort a real fact. The cleavage between the people and the Government exists. The Ministry has failed to discharge its obligations and does not command popular respect and confidence. This is a stern reality. How this gulf can be bridged in a manner consistent with the grave needs of the hour is a question which can only be answered by those real representatives of British Government who are clinging to power and repressive policy at this crisis and refuse to trust the people. What is happening in Bengal is a shocking disgrace to the British Government and also to the Allied powers who are all supposed to have combined to uproot from the world want and misery, tyranny and oppression."

Reports that appeared from day to day in various newspapers could hardly describe the unprecedented calamity that has overtaken rural Bengal, observed Mr. Syed Badrudduja, Mayor of Calcutta, in a statement issued to the Press. In giving the impression of his tour in the interior of Murshidabad district, the Mayor said that he had seen with his own eyes numerous cases of devitalisation—devitalisation brought about by prolonged starvation. Hundreds of them had already succumbed, while thousands were awaiting their inevitable doom. Cholera and malaria had already spread throughout the district and had begun to exact a heavy toll—mostly so in the Kandi sub-division as also in certain parts of Jangipur and Sadar sub-division. Adequate supply of only quinine and cholera vaccine

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and a little medical aid could have saved thousands of human lives.

This picture of gloom and horror, the Mayor remarked, was relieved by the only ray of hope represented by the beneficent activities of the relief organisations in the affected areas. But these, he thought, had touched only the fringe of the problem. Besides, the quantity of food per head supplied in the gruel kitchens was far too insufficient for a single meal a day, and the numbers served therein were only a small fraction of the unfortunate destitutes, middle class families apart.

According to the Mayor, the prime need of the moment was not merely food grains which must at once be rushed to the rural areas but also quinine and cholera vaccine and clothings. Last of all, he said that in the face of this great crisis in Bengal, all controversies should be hushed and the resources of all relief organisations, official and non-official, should be harnessed to save the province from utter ruin and destruction.

The *New Statesman and Nation* criticises both the British and Indian Governments for the manner in which they have been tackling the food situation in Bengal. It says in its editorial comments of the 20th November 1943, "There is no improvement reported in the misery and mortality which famine and cholera are causing in Bengal. From other stricken areas there

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is no news. Grain is arriving from overseas but relief—urgent and important—does not touch the real causes of the catastrophe. What mattered much more than any deficiency in imported rice was the steady and all-round process of price inflation going on gradually for four years. Until the other day when it led to famine which would cause millions of deaths, the Delhi Government and India Office looked on with inertia. They drop their habits of *laissez faire* when they take to coercion. The Central Government showed weakness and vascillation and total failure to devise and apply a sound financial policy. Little leaks out of Delhi about the debate on famine in the Legislative Assembly. Not one word of what Mr. Joshi said was reported. But in its apology the Central Government through its Food Secretary, Mr. Hutchings, at last promised statutory all-round price control. Whether it even now in the obstructive recesses of its old-world mind believes in control and means to carry it out will remain to be seen. Will Lord Wavell—the most human Viceroy India has seen for a generation—have a free hand to deal with the tangle? No, we fear, while Mr. Amery presides over India Office.”



## CHAPTER VIII

### What the Government and the people have done for Bengal

JUST as the food situation in Bengal of this year has been most unusual and unprecedented in the whole history of this unfortunate province so also the charity and benevolence of the people of India and of the British Government for relieving the distress of the sufferers have proved to be most beneficial at the psychological moment, otherwise, if the spectre of famine had been allowed to stalk freely as it did for at least six months, the whole province would have been depopulated within the space of another one year. But now, Bengal has been saved from utter annihilation, and she is reviving slowly from the grip of the great wolf that set its ravenous teeth on the millions of victims.

Of all other provinces of India, the Punjab has responded most magnanimously to the relief of the sufferers. She has contributed money, men, and food grains in the most liberal measure without which it is

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doubtful how far the Central Government could tackle the situation so quickly. The Punjab has sent her men to Bengal not only to help the relief work in the various centres of the province but she has also invited thousands of the homeless destitutes to her own land of the five rivers and sheltered them with food and raiments in her own homes and hearths.

Raja Narendra Nath writes to the press on the 23rd October 1943 :

“ I am highly pleased at the ready response which the appeal, issued by me as President of the Executive Committee of the Punjab Provincial Hindu Sabha and signed by my colleagues Bhai Paramanand and others, has received. We are very grateful to the donors whose names are given below :—

Kali Bari Durga Puja Committee Rs. 2,300 ; D. B. Raja Narendra Nath Rs. 500 ; Seth Lachman Dass Sahib, Masson Road, Lahore, Rs. 500 ; Dr. Behari Lal Trehun, Rawalpindi Rs. 607 ; Anonymous from Marwar Rs. 520 ; Mr. Mohan Singh Makkar on behalf of the Income Tax Practitioners' Association, Amritsar Rs. 500 ; S. B. Sardar Mohan Singh Rs. 250 ; Mr. Jamna Das of N. W. Ry., Hoshiarpur Rs. 150 ; S. N. Dasgupta College, Lahore Rs. 200 ; Mr. Khanda Ram Sahib Kalra, Sargodha Rs. 101 ; L. Dewan Chand Mehta Rs. 100 ; L. Dewan Chand Kapur Rs. 100 ; Mr. Hari Dattaji Mehta Rs. 100 ; Mr. B. D. Puri Rs. 100 ;

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Mr. Prem Kishore Mehra, Dharamsala Cantonment Rs. 100 ; L. Atma Prakashji Rs. 100 ; Mr. Mul Raj Datta Rs. 100 ; Mr. L. R. Dawar, Asst. Registrar, Co-operative Rs. 100 ; Mr. Chandwani of N. W. Ry., Rs. 100 ; and Sardar Atma Deva Singhji of Kapurthala Rs. 100.

“ So long as it is possible to send the contribution to Dr. Shyama Prasad Mukerjee, it has been decided by me to send grain, preferably rice, to Howrah. The Kali Bari Committee desired me to send Rs. 500 in the form of a draft to Dr. Mukerjee for the purchase and distribution amongst the poor, of essentials other than food. I have acted accordingly.

“ The Punjab Literary League, through the highly commendable exertions of Mr. D. R. Chowdury, raised Rs. 15,000 and placed the money at my disposal. On September 5, I got a permit from Mr. Buch for despatch of 200 bags of rice. A wagon was accordingly sent on September 22, from Warburton where rice was obtained at a rate cheaper than that prevailing in the market through my commission agent, Pandit Dina Nath, B.A., who charged no commission.

“ Wagons are not easily obtainable. A wagon filled to its capacity would contain 200 bags. I have got a permit for another wagon. I have spent Rs. 5,000 out of the Hindu Sabha Relief Funds and added to it

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Rs. 5,000 raised by the Literary League, and the second wagon of rice was sent on October 12. This time the permit is in favour of the Director of Civil Supplies, Bengal, but the Railway Receipt in accordance with the advice of Mr. Buch, has been sent to Dr. Shyama Prasad Mukerjee. In this way freight will be paid by the Government.

“ I convened a meeting of Hindu leaders who are raising funds for the relief work of Bengal. I proposed that there should be a central organisation of Hindus. But the proposal did not meet with approval. The Arya Samaj and the Sanatan Dharam Pratinidhi Sabha proposed to work separately. A Central Committee was formed to guide and advise the various organisations. Those who have contributed to funds of the Sanatan Dharam Pratinidhi Sabha or Arya Samaj naturally think that they are absolved from the responsibility of responding to the Hindu Sabha appeal. There is however no doubt that the Punjab has been very active and sympathetic for the relief of distress in Bengal, and the Hindu Sabha is grateful to all who have done it and considers it immaterial whether the funds go to the Sanatan Dharam Pratinidhi Sabha or passes through my hands.”

Raja Narendra Nath again on the 16th November 1943, announces to the press :—

“ I am glad to announce that I have heard from Dr. Shyama Prasad Mukerjee by telegram as well as by

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letter acknowledging receipt of two wagons of rice, despatched on September 22 and October 12. The third wagon has left for Bengal this week. Since my last statement acknowledging donations was published, Rs. 3,233-10-6 have been received. The names of donors are shown below :—

Mr. Thakur Dass, Deputy Superintendent of Police, Montgomery Rs. 50 ; Pandit Brothers, Lahore, Rs. 95-2-6 ; Mr. S. R. Chadda, Sialkot City, Rs. 125 ; Through ' *Tribune* ' Manager Rs. 181 ; Mr. Bal Krishen Ghai, Quetta, Rs. 50 ; Dr. J. R. Karwal Rs. 100 ; Shrimati Phulan Devi, Sahi Mohalla, Lahore, Rs. 51 ; Pandit Raj Krishen Bal, Lahore, Rs. 100 ; Pandit Raj Krishen, Lahore Rs. 185 ; Lala Ram Saran Das Chopra, Lahore, Rs. 101 ; Dayal Singh High School Rs. 500 ; Mr. Jagat Ram, Chief Inspector, Boilers Rs. 51 ; Students' Bengal Relief Fund, Sialkot City Rs. 640 ; Boy Scouts Association, Lahore Rs. 224 ; Shorey Pictures, Lahore Rs. 101 ; Col. N. M. P. Dotivala Rs. 50 ; Central Jail Political Prisoners' Contribution Rs. 85 ; Dr. Trilok Singh on behalf of various donors in Sialkot City Rs. 190-8 ; Mr. Jagat Singh, Bar-at-Law Rs. 100 ; Total of contributions below Rs. 50—Rs. 154 ; Grand total Rs. 3,233-10-6.

“ The contents of second wagon were purchased in the following way :—

Punjab Provincial Hindu Sabha Rs. 5,000 ; Punjab

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Literary League Rs. 3,000 ; Shree Gujrati Samaj, Lahore Rs. 1,333-4.

“ From the money sent for the second wagon for which Rs. 10,000 were sent, the balance of Rs. 1,928-6-3 remained, and this added to Rs. 7,333-4 sent for the third wagon made a total amount of Rs. 9,261-10-3. Out of this Rs. 8,035-14 were spent for the purchase of rice. The net balance in the hand of the commission agent is Rs. 1,225-12-3. For a fourth wagon Rs. 8,089 were utilised out of Rs. 10,000 raised by the Bengal and other Afflicted Areas Relief Committee, Srinagar, Kashmir sent to me by Mrs. Rameshwari Nehru. The balance from this Rs. 10,000 was sent to Dr. Mukerjee to be used in the purchase of other essentials such as clothes, medicines, etc.”

The report of the relief work by Bengal Hindu Mahasabha is quoted below:—

The total collection of the Bengal Provincial Hindu Mahasabha up to October 15, 1943 is approximately Rs. 2,75,000 in cash. It has also received as donation food grains valued approximately at Rs. 1,00,000. A sum of about Rs. 1,50,000 in cash and kind has been spent so far for various centres undertaking different kinds of relief work throughout Bengal either entirely organised or aided by the Mahasabha. Rs. 28,000 has been granted for relief of distressed families of security prisoners. The total number of centres in twenty

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districts and in Calcutta is about 150. \* They are as follows :—

- (1) Free kitchens and cheap grain stores, 122.
- (2) Cheap canteens in Calcutta, 7.
- (3) Free milk canteens, 9.
- (4) Homes for orphans, women and students, 9.
- (5) Temporary hospitals, 2.

The total number of persons daily served through these centres exceeds 50,000. They involve a monthly expenditure of more than a lac of rupees from the Provincial Relief Fund supplemented by collections locally raised. Requests for opening new centres are daily pouring in. Relief work will have to be carried on at least till the end of December 1943.

The chief obstacle to relief work is want of food grains and of necessary transport facilities. The Mahasabha has concentrated its activities mainly outside Calcutta and specially in rural areas. It has opened homes and cheap canteens in Calcutta for serving more than 4,000 persons belonging to middle class families. While it has deemed it its duty to protect the interest of the suffering Hindus, specially of backward classes, within its limited means, its policy has been to render relief to all persons, irrespective of any other consideration, religious or otherwise.

It has been working in full co-operation with all benevolent donors who wanted its help and with other

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relief organisations such as the Bengal Relief Fund, the Marwari Relief Society, the Ramkrishna Mission, the Punjab Relief Committee, the Arya Samaj, the Gujrat Relief Committee, the Sanatan Dharm Pratinidhi Sabha, the Arya Dharma Seva Sangha, Bharat Sevasram, and others. Its efforts have been directed towards co-ordinating the activities of different bodies so as to secure the maximum benefit for the suffering people. Its own relief centres are working in close association with representative persons having common sympathy, irrespective of any party consideration.

It cannot but be emphasised that the relief work undertaken by all the non-official organisations, pooled together, is hardly sufficient for meeting the terrible crisis that confronts the province to-day. The problem is one of supplying food grains at reasonable rates for the majority and at free rates for the destitutes as near their homes as possible, in every part of the province. And this can not be secured unless the interests of the Government and the people become completely identical with each other.

Centres are opened after approval of their scheme of work. Wherever possible, local committees are encouraged to raise one-third to one-half of the total expenditure in cash or in kind. A number of centres in acutely distressed areas are entirely maintained out of the Provincial Relief Fund. Weekly reports and accounts



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in prescribed forms are checked and audited before the next instalment is paid. Workers are sent out to centres wherever required and inspectors visit selected places from time to time for obtaining first-hand information.

The nature of relief organised by the Mahasabha can be classified under the following heads:—

(1) *Free kitchens.*

(2) *Cheap canteens.* 10 *Chattacks* of cooked rice with 4 *Chattacks* of cooked dal and 4 *Chattacks* of vegetable curry are supplied on payment varying from  $\frac{1}{2}$  anna to 1 anna and a half per meal according to the paying capacity of the families and the desire of the donors concerned.

(3) *Distribution of food grains at cheap rates.* Rice, wheat or *atta*, and pulses are supplied to deserving middle class families on ration cards free of cost to about 25 per cent. and to the rest at reduced prices varying from Rs. 8 to Rs. 10 per maund. The quantity per family of five adult persons is about one maund per month.

(4) *Free milk canteens.* Infants and babies are supplied milk with barley or satee, and sugar free of charge at the rate of one *pawa* per head. Cards are distributed for this purpose.

(5) *Medical aid.* Two hospitals are maintained in

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Contai sub-division serving about 75 indoor patients and 1,000 outdoor patients per month. Medical relief is also sent to local centres for meeting emergent conditions from time to time.

(6) *Orphanages and Women's Homes.* Orphanages and women's homes have been opened in Calcutta and in the districts of Barisal, Pabna, and Midnapore.

(7) *Students' Home.* There is a students' home in Contai.

(8) *School.* A free residential school has been opened at Chandranagar for middle class Hindu girls under the supervision of the Parbartak Sangha. The number of persons in these homes is about 750.

Arrangements have been made to send orphans and children of willing parents outside Bengal for free accommodation and training until they attain majority. Records and regular reports of their health and condition are kept in the office. 250 boys have been so far sent to Lahore, Simla, Hyderabad (Sind) and Delhi. Homes for this purpose are also being opened in Bengal outside Calcutta.

(9) *Distribution of cloth.* The Provincial office has so far distributed about 4,000 pieces of cloth, and local Hindu Sabha Committees have also received about 3,000 pieces of cloth from individual donors. Arrangements have been made to distribute 30,000 pieces of *dhoties*, sarees, and wrappers. Shirts, ganjees,

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and frocks have been distributed to more than one thousand children.

(10) *Help to Tols.* Temporary grants have been made to Adhyapaks in Tols and Rs. 5,000 have already been spent on this head.

(11) *Help to individuals.* Rs. 10,000 have been set apart for helping destitute middle-class families, specially in areas where no relief centres have been opened. Rs. 3,000 have already been distributed after due enquiry.

(12) *Disposal of the dead.* Grants have been made for the proper disposal of the dead bodies to the Hindu Satkar Samiti of Calcutta, Faridpur Municipality, and three centres at Tamluk in the districts of Midnapore.

(13) *Economic scheme.* The Mahasabha has made grants for supply of food grains on cheap rates to encourage workers engaged in small industries. Special attention has been given to this aspect in some of the relief centres. In Mahilara (Barisal) 800 persons are being supported in one centre.

The Bengal Relief Committee, Calcutta, is running in Calcutta 2 milk canteens, 1 dispensary, 2 free kitchens for 1,000 distressed persons, 2 cheap canteens for 900 persons, and 12 centres for cheap supply to 52,000 persons extending the same to further 25,000 persons. The Committee is running in 23 districts 172 free kitchens and free doles centres, serving 82,523 distressed persons

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and is ready to extend the service to 43,795 persons further. It is supplying in 23 districts foodstuff at the rate of Rs. 10 and Rs. 12 per maund to 83,685 persons and has sanctioned this supply to 1,10,095 persons. It is running 3 homes for children in 2 districts, providing 275 children with food, clothes, and medicines. It has distributed already clothes worth about Rs. 50,000 and is going to distribute further clothes worth about Rs. 1,00,000 and gunny blankets worth about Rs. 1,00,000 as winter covering. The total donations received are in cash about Rs. 14,45,500 and in kind worth about Rs. 4,00,000 and Rs. 2,35,000 are lying at the Bengal Relief Fund, Bombay upto October 31, 1943.

General Sir Claude Auchinleck, at a press conference at New Delhi on 7th November 1943 gave details of how the army has been helping to cope with the Bengal famine. His Excellency revealed that several thousand troops were being employed on this work, including a number of motorised units, but said that the exact figures could not yet be given for military reasons. He said, "Troops already in Bengal have started work, and other troops were on the move, some of them from a long distance. Nine hundred tons of food daily have been sent, since they started from Calcutta, to some 20 distribution centres in the mufussil. Commencing from yesterday we hope that 2,000 tons of food will be sent daily from Calcutta to the districts. From November 3,

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150 tons are being distributed daily to the south from Calcutta in districts, most affected, such as Midnapore. The military are already unloading food and assisting in distribution. Guards have been posted to prevent pilfering. Lorries used for distribution of food bear posters in Bengali and English 'food for the people.' I think, that is a good idea. It will help to restore confidence."

The Commander-in-Chief explained that there would be in each area a military officer parallel to the civil administration. Besides helping to guard food to prevent looting on the way, the troops would help in unloading, guarding food when unloaded, and if necessary, building temporary accommodation for food. The Army would also help considerably the transport as two-thirds of the units he had been able to spare were motorised and could use their own transport to carry grain. He said, "As regards medical aid, I have made available limited number of medical units including a casualty clearing station (which is really quite a large hospital), several field ambulances which are smaller and more mobile hospitals."

The Commander-in-Chief estimated that the Army would be engaged in this work for three months. He said that the Army was feeding its own labour in Bengal, Bihar, and Orissa, including 5,000 men, women, and children in Bengal alone. All rice has been stopped from issues to British troops and rice issues to Indian

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troops had been cut by two-thirds and *atta* substituted.

The Committee of the Bengal Central Relief Fund, the subscriptions to which now total Rs. 11,05,905 has sanctioned Rs. 10 lakhs for free distribution of clothing and blankets in muffussil areas most seriously affected by the food shortage. More than 1,50,000 pieces of standard cloth and one lakh of cotton blankets have already been purchased. And it is expected that the entire consignment will be despatched from Calcutta during the next ten days followed by more than one lakh lessian blankets which are now under production in the Calcutta jute mills. In addition to these supplies, the Committee has purchased 200 maunds of powder barley and a substantial quantity of medical supplies which are now being distributed.

From the money at his disposal in the Central Cyclone Relief, His Excellency the Governor has sanctioned the purchase of more than 1,30,000 pieces of standard cloth, 55,000 jute quilts, 2,000 pounds of quinine for free distribution in the cyclone affected areas. The balance of the fund is being held for aid to orphanages and subsidies to non-official relief organisations. The distribution of all supplies will be undertaken by sub-divisional officers in co-operation with non-official organisations and committees.

The A. P. I. report of the 8th November, 1943, says:—

The Minister for Publicity in the Bengal Govern-

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ment, Mr. P. B. Mullick, made a statement on Monday explaining what quantities of food grains have been received by Bengal from outside from March 1 to August 31, 1943, and how they have been utilised.

Mr. Mullick says:—For a long time past insidious propaganda has been carried on in some quarters with a view to creating an impression that food grains are pouring into Bengal from other provinces only to disappear mysteriously. We have been too much pre-occupied with expanding and accelerating relief operations to be able to pay any attention so far to these mischievous suggestions. I take this opportunity, however, of clarifying the position and explaining exactly what quantities of food grains we have received from outside from March 1 to August 31, 1943, and how we have utilised them. During this period the total quantity of food grains received by Government, including purchases by Government agents from outside Bengal and purchases on Government account within the province is 65·30 lakhs of maunds. Out of this total it was found possible, after meeting the minimum requirements of industrial labour employed on War work, the essential services, public utility concerns and the amounts needed for distribution through cheap grain shops in Calcutta and the industrial area, to despatch quantities aggregating to 16·5 lakhs maunds to

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muffussil districts mainly for areas in the greatest distress.

It may be explained in this connection that the priorities in the Calcutta industrial area, the essential services, and the public utility concerns such as the Port Commissioners, the Calcutta Corporation, the Electric Supply Corporation, and the Oriental Gas Company, received supplies amounting approximately to 22 lakhs maunds. Cheap grain shops, bakeries, eating houses etc., received approximately 15 lakhs maunds. The balance of approximately 11·79 lakhs maunds, after deducing despatches to districts (16·51 lakhs maunds), represented paddy and wheat for milling during September, and the reserve stocks needed to meet the demands during that month of the Calcutta priorities, etc., and the needs of muffussil areas in Howrah, 24-Parganas, and the flood affected areas of Midnapore which also draw their supplies from Calcutta.

During the month of September 1943, the corresponding figures of food grains procured on Government account were as follows :—

September—32·50 lakhs maunds.

October—25·70 lakhs maunds.

As a result of the increased receipt it was found possible to despatch to districts the following quantities :—

September—7·48 lakhs maunds.



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October—13·10 lakhs maunds.

Despatches to districts have been limited by the amount of railway and steamer freight available. With the assistance of the military authorities, which is now available, supplies to the districts are being rapidly increased. During the month of November, as already announced by H. E. the Commander-in-Chief, despatches to the district will amount to 2,000 tons per day or about 16·8 lakhs maunds per month. It may be possible to exceed even this amount.

I may add further that before this intensified programme was adopted, food grains were already being rushed to the distressed areas in Bengal at the rate of about 1,500 tons a day of which 800 tons were booked direct from the Punjab to various points in the province. Let us hope that the canard about mysterious disappearances of food grains will now go out of circulation."

## CHAPTER IX

# Hungry Bengal is the shadow of Hungry India

**S**IR Manohar Lal, the Finance Minister of the Punjab said in the course of his address delivered on the 15th November 1943, on the occasion of the Golden Jubilee celebrations of Gordon College, Rawalpindi, "We are hungry in India of to-day and faced with unheard of privations, proverbial poverty, which makes her quite incapable of eliminating evils from our midst as early as possible. Thousands of people are actually starving. Until and unless we solve this important issue of providing food to the hungry millions, we cannot try anything for character-building, we cannot achieve greatness, we cannot tackle the world problems that are likely to confront us in the new era after the War." He added that the famine in Bengal was a real index of the extreme poverty of our country, that one out of every twelve inhabitants of this country was lacking in food, which resulted in the lowering of the stamina of the

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people. He pointed out how 73 per cent of the population of India depended on agriculture.

Referring to the recent speech of Mr. Amery, the Secretary of State for India in Council, that every month there were 4,000,000 extra mouths to be fed, Sir Manohar Lal quoted Dr. Anstey, whom he characterised as a great authority on Indian economics, and who in his opinion had studied the conditions prevailing in India, and said that the economic life in this continent needed transformation, suggesting a wise use of the country's sterling assets. He further said that the late Director-General of Medical Service in India had also expressed his opinion that mere growing of more food would not prove to be an effective remedy for all the ills of India—an old country with a population of 400 millions. He pointed out that a very large number of tillers of the soil had not got more than 3 acres of land to cultivate.

In a mood of pessimism Sir Manohar Lal asked his audience, "Are we doing anything to get out of this tangle, despite the rapid rate of increase in population? India had been for a long time over populated, and it is now for us a matter to consider as to what should be done to enable her to carry the burden in this period of distress. It is the real duty of every Indian to ameliorate the conditions in the country by overhauling the entire economic system with a view to transplant a new India. Industrialisation of India

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after the War would not be an easy process. In the competition that is likely to crop up after the War, the West would try to re-establish its trade. The English economic system would re-establish itself shortly after the termination of hostilities. The slogan of the West after the War would be "export, export, and export". England would command large transport materials and an efficient banking system, in addition to large financial resources, to restore her normal economic conditions."

Dr. Kunzru in the course of the famine debate in the Council of State said that they had thought too much of the independence of the provinces and too little of the welfare of the people. He said that the constitutional technicalities should not stand in the way, that the question of food supply should be tackled as a whole, and no province should be free to deal with it as it liked, and that an agricultural committee should be appointed to lay down plans and co-ordinate the efforts of the Provincial Governments in carrying them out. He declared that he believed in the economic unity of India, and unless this unity was maintained, he feared that we would have to face far greater disasters than any hitherto encountered.

Dr. L. C. Jain, Head of the Department of Economics, Punjab University, in the course of his address on "Economic India" on the 27th November 1943, pointed

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out that nothing was the geraterness than the economy of India. In India, which possessed a population equal to one-fifth of the population of the world, the income *per capita* was only £5 as against £75 *per capita* in the United Kingdom. India's economy was not able to meet what had been described as five enemies, *viz.*, want, diseases, ignorance, squalor and idleness. A large number of people in India was not able to get adequate diet and a large number was badly nourished. As a result of malnutrition all sorts of diseases visited the people. Want was so great that on an average no one in India could buy more than 16 yards of cloth in a year. Due to deterioration in health resulting from malnutrition, the average life of an Indian had come to be about 27 years whereas in America it was 60 years. Much greater ignorance actually prevailed than was generally known. In India they had fallen into a vicious circle from which they were not able to get out.

Inspite of wars and famines, said Dr. Jain, during the last three centuries, India's population had increased three times. But while the population had increased the agriculture of the country, which was its mainstay, had remained the same, and apart from some recent improvement, there had been no appreciable increase. There had of course been improvement in the sugarcane cultivation, but on the whole, fertility of the soil had not increased. During the war period in general, fertility

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had suffered for lack of proper manure, and their three-fourths of the land under cultivation depended upon the weather alone. In 1906-07 the yield of wheat per acre was 8·16 and in 1940-41 it was 8·9 per acre, and this yield compared most unfavourably with the yield in other countries. Other big countries improved their yield even before the War, but on its outbreak, India was found in a helpless state.

Inflation, wartime restriction, half-hearted control, profiteering and hoarding had all resulted in creating a strange situation in India with regard to her economy. Agriculture was not proving helpful on account of its inefficiency. Even though India was the second country in the world because of her man-power and raw materials, yet on the industrial map, it had a place far below. Our country was the biggest sugar manufacturer and probably the third country in respect of minerals—coal, lead, chromium, etc. But we have begun on the wrong side. Instead of starting heavy industries we have started with consumer goods. While production had lagged behind, the unusual expansion in currency had, in Dr. Jain's view, created the whole difficulty. In 1939, the country had currency notes of the value of Rs. 179 crores, and to-day, it had currency notes of the value of Rs. 800 crores.

Dr. Jain criticised inflation, which he described as a form of taxation. Inflation, he said, was like robbery

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but was invisible and continuous, and while a case of robbery could be taken before a court of law, inflation was legal robbery. He was glad that now some anti-inflationary measures had been taken. Pleading for economic planning in order to ensure India's economic prosperity, Dr. Jain said that the plan must be for all and not for certain areas. It must be a plan for the economic unity of India and her people. It must not be wooden but elastic.

Mr. Arthur Moore, the well-known journalist and ex-editor of the *Statesman* expressed his views on the famine situation in India in the following words :—

“ Two necessities confront us with the necessity for immediate salvage measures for Bengal, Orissa, and large areas of Southern India, and preparation of medical and sanitary plans to cope with a possible sudden sweep of epidemic disease, and the necessity for long-term planning to deal with the root scourge of inhuman poverty.

“ To-day we are keying up for resolute action. The famine is recognised to be a menace not only to military plans but to the economy and health of the world, large areas of which are elsewhere also being devastated. We have a new Viceroy, the sense of a fresh start. Bad though things may be, the flag of hope is fluttering in a faintly perceptible breeze.

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"In this new atmosphere, better suited to obtain for it a hearing, let me reproduce from an article called 'Beloved India' in the 'Fortnightly Review' of November 1932, a passage in which, foreseeing that 'starvation itself' would finally step in, I advocated intensive planning. The Russian example to which I referred will also encounter less prejudice now than it did eleven years ago. Here is the passage:—

'The outstanding fact about India is the poverty of the people and the prospect of this becoming steadily worse with the enormous growth of the population until, failing wars or pestilence, starvation itself steps in to adjust the balance. No one is doing anything about this. We have no plan and the Indians have no plan.

'There is a school of Indian politicians which is definitely hostile to British business and has confiscatory leanings towards the colossal capital invested in the country. Hence much talk of safeguards; yet we all know that there are only two safeguards worth having. One is the goodwill of our Indian fellow-citizens, and this we possess only in part; the other is the ability in the last resort to protect our interests ourselves. But the defensive will not do. The Englishman must give a lead in India, otherwise his mission is exhausted, and nothing will remain except a painful process of gradual retreat in commerce as well as in Government.



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‘ We have to recover lost goodwill. We can only do this as a moral force actively helping India to the conquest of new worlds, the realisation of new ideals.

‘ It ought to be possible to devise a great Indian plan drawn up by an Economic General Staff, on lines as large as Russia’s plans, but far more beneficent. India has credit in Britain where Russia had none ; so there is no question of dumping goods on the outside world in order to obtain credits wherewith to buy machinery and pay experts. Britain can supply India with factory and agricultural machinery and help her to organise her agriculture and her other industries, so that her people shall get the benefit in good wages and a higher standard of living and increased consumption of her own products. As a market for British piecegoods India is a diminishing quantity. As a potential market for machinery her limit lies only in the pettiness of our imagination.

‘ We marvel at the new Russian city of Magnetogorsk but do not think of the Magnetogorsk that India might have in the Central Provinces. India has manganese, iron, coal, and oil in quantity ; she has cotton, wool, jute and silk ; she has a colossal but poor agricultural industry. And she has a population approaching four hundred millions, which instead of

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consuming all this natural wealth, lives on the edge of hunger.

“ Why? It is no answer to say that the people are helpless, ignorant, and unambitious. Certainly they are. But what about us? We can organise them, we can teach them, we can instil desire into them.

“ Above all, we might put heart into that Indian ‘ intelligentsia ’ whom we have insisted on producing, but to whom hitherto we have given little but stones when they asked for bread. Employment and an ideal for India shared in common with us are what their bodies need for nourishment and their souls for self-respect. At heart they are sick of the futilities of boycott and non-co-operation. These and worse still, the secret society and the terrorists’ work are no substitutes for a man’s job, for seed to the sower and bread to the eater, and that sleep of the labouring man which is sweet, whatever he eats.

‘ It should be possible for us to get together and make things grow—grow as and where they have never grown before—and to distribute and consume what we grow.’

“ Lord Reading discussed the above passage with me and said, ‘ When I was Viceroy I sometimes had some such idea of intensive planning on a big scale, but I was too busy on day-to-day administration ever to get down to it. I doubt if any Viceroy will ever find the time.’

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But it is not Viceregal time so much as Viceregal initiative that is required, and now there is hope.

“ One reason why it was impossible to get a hearing in 1932 was that the increasing poverty was concealed by the sale of the gold savings of the people for export abroad which began the previous year and continued throughout the thirties. During the decade hundreds of crores, the equivalent of several years of the total revenue of the Government of India, were exported to England in the form of gold, and a large section of the population parted with and lived on their hoarded treasure. Gold was rising in value, and the export was naturally welcome to the British Treasury. The Government of India encouraged it. It was impossible to get them to purchase the gold themselves and use it as a base for development loans or even to check the export by a tax. How heavily the slump which started in 1930 and unfortunately coincided with a non-co-operation campaign, hit the Indian poor (whose almost only practicable method of saving has been a metal hoard) is shown by the fact that whereas in 1929-30 India still imported Rs. 35 crores of precious metals, the equivalent of one rupee per head of her population, three years later she was already exporting at almost double this rate in the form of distress gold.

“ Unofficial response to suggestions for planning was

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necessarily ineffective. Mr. G. D. Birla in 1934, addressed the Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce on the subject, and his speech, published in pamphlet form as "A Plea for Planning" gave figures on the fall in the total food grains available per capita which are worth studying to-day. He calculated that the decreased figures for consumption plus the substitution for an import of treasure equal to one rupee per head of the population of an export equal to one rupee thirteen annas might mean that between 1930 and 1933 the average annual income of the people in real wealth had dropped four rupees.

"Some years later an unofficial National Planning Committee was formed with Pandit Jawahar Lal Nehru as Chairman. Its work, which was regionally allocated was interrupted when he and others were arrested, but the material collected is presumably still available. The Government of India might find it of some use to-day.

"India's economy has been progressively deranged since 1930. The War which has necessitated a large export of her products abroad and greater internal reservation of them for military purposes, has further increased the strain, as the public statements of Sir John Anderson in Parliament and of Lord Wavell before he left England have judiciously recognised. To start recovery she needs a steady flow of food and of

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consumer goods from abroad and to find ships for this is itself an urgent military necessity. There will still be a large balance owing to India for war goods even if the Allies start paying more in the form of imports, and it is essential that payment of this balance by inflationary finance should end. Because Britain has tended to regard India as a possession, it has not occurred to her to adopt the same sound methods of War finance as she adopted for America. In the last War she immediately sent Lord Reading to arrange a large dollar loan, and in this War until lease-lend came to her aid, not only did she strain her shipping resources to keep up her exports to the U. S. A., she even sold out her private capital investments. If to-day Indian opinion were properly rallied to War effort and the financial reasons explained, Britain would have no difficulty in raising a rupee loan, and if some British-owned properties were sold as well as any Indian securities privately held in Britain, they would fetch a fair price."

## CHAPTER X

### Lord Wavell's Task

**I**T is not only a happy augury but also an act of genuine benevolence and humanity that Lord Wavell immediately on taking charge of this country has paid a visit to the famine-affected areas and has also made a ready arrangement for the relief of the suffering souls in the various provinces. Lord Wavell has been known so far as a great soldier and commander of the battlefields, but now he has shown by his acts and deeds that he is also a great friend and saviour of those who suffer from starvation of food and privation of shelter. It is probably for the first time in the history of India that the Viceroy has shown so much of real sympathy for the distressed and destitute souls of this unhappy country, and if we are to judge a man by his acts and not merely by his words, we have reasons to believe that Lord Wavell will soon adopt a policy which will remove at once not only the food famine but also the political deadlock in India. At the time of writing we hear rumours that His Excellency may invite Mahatma Gandhi to discuss the political situation. There is also

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a growing volume of public opinion in England that favours ending the present deadlock. Besides, Sir Claude Auchinleck, Commander-in-Chief is credited with great sympathy for India's legitimate demands. It is also a happy sign that preparations for the Allied offensive against Japan are nearing completion. It is felt in political circles that India stands a good chance of being granted a large measure of self-government provided that the Congress leaders agree to concentrate India's resources on defeating Japan.

We are tempted to quote below in full length an article by Mr. Kalinath Roy, published in the *Tribune* of November 8, 1943 :—

“It is only natural that in a democratic age a new Viceroy should, on his assumption of office, be flooded with advice from all possible quarters as to the most urgent tasks that lie before him. All the more is this so at a time like the present when the country, of which he has just taken over charge, is in the grip of a terrible crisis. In this respect no Viceroy of India ever found himself placed in a situation which, in its magnitude and complexity, could bear a moment's serious comparison with that which confronts Viscount Wavell to-day. A war with a fierce and implacable enemy on and beyond the eastern frontier of the country ; an economic crisis almost unprecedented even in India's dismal history, which in some parts of the country has actually assumed the character and

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proportions of a famine, and a political deadlock which has resulted in the suspension of the normal constitution over the greater part of the country, and in the detention and incarceration of thousands of political workers including almost all the leaders of what the Government themselves describe as the most important political party in the country,—when in all its history did India have to face a situation like this? Each one of the three problems is grave enough to absorb the energies of a new Viceroy. Together they constitute a task of such formidable magnitude that even the bravest Viceroy might well quail before it.

“The difficulty of the new Viceroy's position is not lightened but apparently increased by the multitude and diversity of the counsel that is being offered to His Excellency. There are persons who have been telling him that just as the primary duty of a Government at a time of civil commotion is to maintain order, the primary duty of a Government engaged in a war, and especially in a war of the magnitude of the present one, must be to prevent the country from being over-run, and if possible, to punish the assailant. Others have been telling His Excellency that vital and urgent as is the task of winning the war, the task of meeting and overcoming the economic crisis is no less vital and urgent, that, as a matter of fact, it must take precedence of all other tasks, if only because a people must be kept alive if it is to enjoy the priceless



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blessings which it is the professed object of the war to secure for it. Thirdly and lastly, there are those, and they include practically all thoughtful and patriotic Indians and a considerable number of discerning Britishers, who have been telling the new Viceroy that nations can no more live by bread alone than individuals; that the greatest of all forms of hunger is the hunger for liberty and freedom; that it is for the preservation of this most precious of all human assets that Britain has professedly entered on the present war; that having done so, it is its most imperative duty and the paramount duty of its chief representative in this country to give India the liberty and freedom she has been hungering for; and that in plain English this means that he must address himself, first and foremost, to the task of resolving the political deadlock in India, which has arisen directly out of the continued denial to India of the liberty and freedom she so passionately craves for.

“Only a moment’s serious reflection, however, suffices to show that the three problems, so far from being irreconcilable or mutually exclusive, are not only closely connected with one another but really resolve themselves into one. You cannot fight the War successfully in the sense of both winning it and establishing peace on an enduring basis without a substantial settlement of both the economic and the political problem; and

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neither the solution of the economic problem nor the solution of the political problem would by itself give the country that security, which must be the foundation at once of its freedom and its progress, unless the War in which the democracies are at present engaged ends in a victory for them. There are two equally grave fallacies against which one must be on one's guard in this matter. One consists in the assumption that mere victory in this war, irrespective of the manner and the conditions in which it is won, would give India the freedom she longs for. The other consists in the belief that it is immaterial, for the purpose of India's attaining her freedom in the near future, whether the war ends in a victory for the United Nations or not. Those who hold the first view fail to see that if India remains a subject country at the time the War ends and the Peace Conference is held, there will be nothing to prevent her from being treated again as she was treated at the end of the last World War, inspite of all that have been said about the magnificent contributions that has been made by her towards the prosecution of the War and the heroic part played by her soldiers, especially in East Africa among others by Lord Wavell himself.

“ In the last World War, as in the present, the services rendered by India and her soldiers were acknowledged in glowing terms by British and Allied statesmen.

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But for all that her political shackles remained intact. Who can say that the same thing will not happen again unless India has, at the time the war ends, a National Government of her own, unless at the Peace Conference she can speak through her own chosen representatives? Nor is this all. If the four hundred millions of India's people are still held in a state of subjection after the present War, that very fact is sure to lead both to dangerous discontent and insecurity at home, which is too often the parent of revolution and to a renewal of external trouble. If a country of 400 millions of people, with endless, even if undeveloped material resources, remains subject to exploitation by another country, other nations both far and near are bound to cast covetous eyes on it; and that is exactly how most of the recent world wars originated. This is the reason why so many of us have always held that if India does not become a free, self-governing nation before the War ends, then even the winning of the war by the United Nations would mean the defeat of the peace. It would in reality only sow the seeds of a future world war with India herself once again in a state of fearful turmoil, if not an actual moral revolt. Those who hold the second view overlook the equally obvious fact that if the present war ended in the defeat of the United Nations, then India would have to fight over again the battle for her freedom which she has waged so strenuously for nearly half a

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century and which has very nearly ended in her victory ; and she would have to wage it under conditions immeasurably harder and more irksome than those under which she has waged it so far.

“ The economic problem is directly connected with the war, and while the present conditions can and must be mitigated immediately and irrespective of the duration of the war, it is quite clear that the final solution of the problem is bound up with the successful termination of the war. The prices may and must come down, and food grains, which at present are unavailable in many parts of the country, must be made available everywhere in reasonable quantities ; but no amount of human ingenuity or manipulation can bring prices down to the pre-war level or restore the old economic conditions with such vital modifications as they undoubtedly called for, unless and until the war has ended in a victory for the democracies and the nations are once again free to address themselves to the sovereign task of national and international reconstruction. The exceptional situation that one meets with in Bengal and some other parts of the country, particularly in Bengal, is undoubtedly the creation of folly, incompetence, greed and perversity, but even when statesmanship and humanity have brought this situation under control, as we all hope it will soon be brought, it will still remain

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abnormal as long as the war lasts, as the situation is abnormal all over the world to-day. And this question of bringing the economic situation under control, like the question of prosecuting the War successfully, is essentially bound up with the question of removing the political deadlock. Whether we think of the food problem in Bengal or of the economic situation of the country as a whole, it can be dealt with in the present conditions only by a national government, a government whose primary concern is the well-being of the people committed to its care, and which holds and can hold office only as long as it retains the confidence of that people. That is exactly how the economic situation is being dealt with with some measure of success in other countries engaged in the war. That is the only way in which it can be so dealt with in our own country.

“ A careful examination of both the question of an effective prosecution of the War and the question of an effective tackling of the economic problem thus leads to but one conclusion, namely, that the political deadlock must be resolved. It must be resolved not merely, as I have said, because freedom and liberty are the most precious of all human assets, and a nation which has professedly unsheathed its sword and risked its all to preserve these invaluable assets for the world, is bound in ordinary consistency and fairness, to restore these assets to

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the part of the world which is under its own direct control, but because the removal of the deadlock is pre-eminently a war necessity and a vital economic necessity, because victory in the war cannot be won in the real sense of the term, which necessarily includes the establishment of a durable peace, nor can the economic crisis with which India is faced to-day be effectively dealt with unless India has a national government in sovereign charge of its affairs. Mr. Amery and Lord Linlithgow simply deceived themselves when they ignored this obvious fact and treated the political problem of India as a post-war problem. It is no more a post-war problem than the question of winning the war itself or the allied question of solving the grave economic problem of India is a post-war problem. You cannot solve either of these problems without resolving the political deadlock.

“If Lord Wavell wishes to succeed where his predecessor has failed, he must move out of the old rut and look for a new approach to the political problem. He must give up repeating the old worn-out *mantram* : ‘The question is essentially one for India herself; before Britain can take the next step, India must produce an agreed solution.’ India can produce an agreed situation only after Britain has made up her mind to hand over her power and authority to her and has restored the *status quo* in India to meet together and carry on negotiations with one another and with

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the British Government. Let not the question of Pakistan or of majorities and minorities trouble His Excellency. After all, he has not to write on a *tabula rasa*. India has for very many years been a single homogeneous political unity; and to-day she has an enfranchised population roughly amounting to one-tenth of her total population. Let Britain hand over her civil authority to the representative of these enfranchised people and leave them to manage their affairs in the best way they can, and in the military sphere only retain the authority necessary for carrying on the War successfully, not in disregard of the wishes but with the full consent of the National Government. The moment she expresses her readiness to do so, the political deadlock will be automatically resolved. Let Britain have no fear as to the attitude of this National Government. It will be impelled by its sense of duty, no less than by its instinct of self-preservation and the logic of irresistible necessity, both to deal with India's economic problem as other National Governments are dealing with similar problems, and to co-operate actively and whole-heartedly with the other democratic nations of the world in resisting and suppressing German and Japanese aggression. In resolving the political deadlock Lord Wavell will thus solve all the three vital and urgent problems that face India to-day."













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*Of the author —*

“ . . . . . he is not a little man by any stretch of imagination. Physically he is big and intellectually he is big and he has a big conscience and a heart much bigger than the “Last Corner”, which would never hold all the things that stir his sympathies and excite his imagination. All his interest is wrapped up in the little men, their grievances, their wrongs and their sufferings. . . .”

**B. G. HORNIMAN.**

*(Extract from Foreword)*